



Deconstruction of the Semantic Shift of the Word "Sunnah" in Salafi Discourse in Indonesia

Muhammad Jaohar Tsani¹, Lu'lu Ulzannah², Satriani³

Universitas Pendidikan Indoensia, Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Indonesia,
Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Indonesia

ljtsani17@upi.edu, luluulzannah69@gmail.com, satriani.ani1105@gmail.com

Abstract

This study explores the semantic change of the term Sunnah in contemporary Islamic discourse in Indonesia, focusing on the Salafi group. Traditionally, Sunnah refers to the teachings of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and serves as the second primary source of Islamic law after the Qur'an. In contemporary practice, however, it has expanded into symbolic functions, identity markers, and religious commodification through products, lifestyles, and da'wah strategies. Using a qualitative embedded case study design, data were collected via open-ended questionnaires and analyzed thematically. Findings reveal semantic shifts including generalization, specialization, amelioration, pejoration, and metonymy. The Salafi group interprets Sunnah as a marker of religious identity and da'wah tool, yet this can foster exclusivism and social division. The study concludes that Sunnah has evolved from a theological concept into one embedded with ideological and commercial meanings, highlighting the need to strengthen religious literacy to preserve its substantive meaning and prevent misuse for ideological or commercial purposes.

Keywords Sunnah; Salafi; Semantic Shift

مستخلص البحث

كشف هذا البحث التحول الدلالي لمصطلح "السنة" في الخطاب الإسلامي المعاصر في إندونيسيا، مع التركيز على المجموعة السلفية. تقليدياً، تشير السنة إلى تعاليم النبي محمد ﷺ وتُعد المصدر الثاني الأساسي للشريعة الإسلامية بعد القرآن الكريم. ومع ذلك، في الممارسة المعاصرة، توسعت لتشمل وظائف رمزية، وعلامات هوية، واستثمار ديني في المنتجات وأنماط الحياة واستراتيجيات الدعوة. باستخدام تصميم دراسة حالة نوعية متداخلة، جُمعت البيانات من خلال استبيانات مفتوحة وتم تحليلها موضوعياً. تكشف النتائج عن تحولات دلالية تشمل التعميم، التخصيص، التحسين، التخطيم، والاستعارة. تفسر المجموعة السلفية السنة كعلامة للهوية الدينية وأداة دعوية، إلا أن ذلك قد يعزز الانحصار والانقسام الاجتماعي. تستنتج الدراسة أن السنة تحولت من مفهوم لاهوتي إلى مفهوم محتمل بالدلالات الأيديولوجية والتجارية، ما يبرز الحاجة إلى تعزيز الثقافة الدينية للحفاظ على معناها الجوهرية ومنع إساءة استخدامها لأغراض أيديولوجية أو تجارية.

كلمات أساسية: السنة؛ السلفية؛ التحول الدلالي

Introduction

Language functions as a mirror of the ideology, identity, and power that individuals or groups seek to assert (Bourdieu, 1993). It serves not merely as a medium for conveying messages but as an instrument for constructing and negotiating political positions (Anshori, 2017). Within religious and cultural contexts, language frequently bears a weight that exceeds the simple transmission of information; it operates as a marker of identity, a vehicle for ideological representation, and a means of securing social and spiritual legitimacy (Niraula et al., 2022). This dynamic is evident in the increasingly pervasive use of religious narratives, which have expanded beyond the domain of worship to permeate social, political, and commercial spheres.

One manifestation of this phenomenon is the use of the term *Sunnah*. The term carries not only lexical and normative meanings but also complex theological, ideological, historical, and sociological dimensions (Khan, 2024). Theologically, *Sunnah* is understood as the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ derived from his sayings, actions, and approvals (Kamali, 2013). In contemporary Indonesian religious practice, however, the meaning of *Sunnah* has undergone both expansion and narrowing. Expansion occurs when *Sunnah* transcends the boundaries of ritual worship and enters social-political and cultural spheres. Conversely, narrowing takes place when the term is claimed as an exclusive identity marker of a particular group, thereby restricting its meaning to a specific, sectarian interpretation.

The semantic shift of the term *Sunnah* reflects the dynamic nature of language, which evolves in accordance with discursive constructions and the social structures of society. This aligns with Labov's (2010) view that semantic change occurs gradually through social interaction and is influenced by cognitive and cultural factors. Labov refers to this process as *change from below*, a transformation that unfolds unconsciously among speakers but, over time, becomes embedded in collective meaning (Labov, 2010). Accordingly, the semantic transformation of *Sunnah* can be read as an ideological articulation that develops gradually within the public sphere. This shift can be observed in the dynamics of religious practices among Indonesian Muslims today, which are increasingly shaped by complex socio-political contexts (Hefner, 2011). One indication of this is the growing prevalence and deliberate use of the term *Sunnah*, no longer confined to ritual worship but extending into various dimensions of everyday life. This phenomenon is evident in the emergence of numerous social media accounts and platforms adopting the *Sunnah* label, such as *Sunnahlifeid*, *KajianSunnah.co.id*, and *SekolahSunnah.com*, which exemplify the processes of semanticization and commodification of the term within the digital public sphere.

The labeling of the term *Sunnah* does not merely reflect individual religious preferences but also embodies the identity claims of specific groups within the public sphere. In this context, *Sunnah* is employed performatively to both assert and distinguish a group's religious identity from that of others. Implicitly, this practice constructs a dichotomy between what is deemed *Sunnah* and what is not, thereby potentially fostering processes of delegitimization toward religious practices that

do not conform to the group's definition. Consequently, the term *Sunnah* undergoes a process of ideologization, shifting from its originally inclusive meaning to a symbol of exclusivity and group affiliation.

The phenomenon of the ideologization of the term *Sunnah* is evident in the religious discourse constructed by Salafī groups. These groups consistently position themselves as the most authentic representation of the *Sunnah* while simultaneously establishing themselves as the standard of truth in matters of religiosity (Zamhari, 2022). In their view, *Sunnah* is understood not only as the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ but also as a boundary of identity that distinguishes them from other Islamic groups deemed different or even deviant. This finding aligns with Sanjaya's research, which demonstrates that Salafī groups interpret *Sunnah* as an ideological symbol that affirms group identity and reinforces their position as followers of the *salaf aṣ-ṣāliḥ* (Sanjaya, 2022). This indicates that *Sunnah* has shifted in meaning from a normative and passive concept to a strategic one, functioning as an instrument for legitimizing ideological authority in the public sphere.

Furthermore, Salafī groups also position *Sunnah* as the antithesis of *bid'ah*. Within their framework of thought, any religious practice lacking a basis in the Qur'an and the *Sunnah* is classified as *bid'ah* and must be categorically rejected (Putra et al., 2024). This binary opposition between *Sunnah* and *bid'ah* functions as a rhetorical strategy to reinforce claims of authenticity while clearly delineating ideological boundaries from other groups deemed incompatible. Consequently, the meaning of *Sunnah* in Salafī discourse is not inclusive; rather, it undergoes a process of exclusivization and is deployed as an instrument of control over the religious practices of other Muslims.

Historically, the Salafī movement in Indonesia has envisioned the purification of Islamic teachings from practices considered to be *bid'ah*, superstition (*khurafat*), and polytheism (*shirk*) (Abidin & Hafizah, 2019). The movement emerged in the 19th century, developed by modernist figures such as Muḥammad 'Abduh, Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī, and Rashīd Riḍā, who advocated the reform of Islamic thought in response to the challenges of colonialism and the decline of the Muslim community (Sunesti et al., 2018).

In its religious practice, the Salafī movement is characterized by a textualist approach, a confrontational stance toward differences, and puritanism in matters of creed (*'aqīdah*) and worship (*'ibādah*) (Putra et al., 2024). This approach not only produces an exclusive style of preaching but also fosters a tendency to negate the religious practices of other Muslim groups deemed incompatible or even deviant (Firdaus & Amiruddin, 2021). However, this commitment to textual literalism was seriously tested when the COVID-19 pandemic struck. The movement, which had previously rejected various forms of religious innovation, began to adopt certain adaptations, such as conducting congregational prayers with physical distancing, wearing masks, and complying with government health protocols (Putra et al., 2024). This response indicates a significant shift in their methodological approach — from a rigid and textual *aṣālah* framework to a more adaptive and contextual

maṣlahah-oriented approach. In this context, the Salafī movement appears to have opened space for interpretive methods (*istinbāt*) such as *qiyās*, which it had often rejected in the past. This phenomenon illustrates that even a movement consistently advocating the purification of Islamic teachings is not immune to the necessity of flexibly adapting to pressing social realities.

Based on this epistemological framework, it can be concluded that the semantic shift of the term *Sunnah* in the contemporary context is not merely an ordinary linguistic phenomenon. Rather, this shift reflects the fact that *Sunnah* is not a static and final concept but one that is continuously negotiated through religious practices taking place in Indonesia's public sphere.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the semantic shift of the term *Sunnah* as constructed by the Salafī movement in Indonesia. Specifically, it pursues three main objectives: (1) to examine how the Salafī movement constructs the meaning of *Sunnah*, (2) to explore the Salafī movement's perceptions of the term *Sunnah*, and (3) to assess the impact of this meaning construction on religious practices and social relations in the public sphere.

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach with an embedded case study design to analyze the construction of the meaning of *Sunnah* within the context of the Salafī movement. This design was chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of a primary case with several distinct yet interrelated units of analysis (Yin, 2017). The main focus of the study is the semantic shift of the term *Sunnah*, with the Salafī movement serving as the unit of analysis that represents the social and ideological context in which this shift takes place.

The respondents were selected using purposive sampling, based on specific criteria relevant to the objectives of the study (Miles et al., 2013). The number of respondents was not predetermined at the outset but was instead guided by the principle of data saturation, in which data collection is discontinued once the information obtained becomes repetitive and no longer yields significant new findings (Miles et al., 2013).

The criteria for respondent selection were divided into two main categories: first, individuals with direct or indirect involvement in the Salafī community, such as active participation in religious gathering (*majelis ilmu*), educational institutions, or da'wah activities; and second, individuals with an adequate background in religious education, whether obtained through formal or non-formal pathways.

Data were collected through the distribution of questionnaires containing open-ended questions to respondents from the Salafī movement. The open-ended format was chosen to allow respondents to provide narrative, reflective, and contextual answers based on their personal experiences and perspectives.

The collected data were analyzed using the thematic analysis approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2023). This approach was employed to identify, organize, and interpret thematic patterns within the qualitative data. Thematic analysis was chosen because it aligns with the needs of an embedded single-case

study, which requires cross-unit reading and in-depth interpretation of the cultural and ideological meanings that emerge from respondents' narratives.

The thematic analysis was conducted in the following stages. The first stage was data organization, which involved compiling all questionnaires and checking their completeness. The data were then rearranged into narrative form to facilitate reading and annotation. The second stage was initial coding, in which the researcher repeatedly read the data to identify segments relevant to the research focus and objectives. Information pertinent to the construction of the meaning of *Sunnah* was marked as initial codes. The third stage involved grouping the data according to the main themes that emerged from the coding process. At this stage, the researcher also identified indications of semantic change by referring to Chaer's classification of semantic shifts (Chaer, 2012), , which includes generalization, specialization, amelioration, pejoration, and metonymy.

The fourth stage was data reduction, a filtering process aimed at eliminating irrelevant, duplicate, or off-focus data so that only substantial information was subjected to further analysis. The fifth stage was data interpretation and presentation, in which the refined data were analyzed in depth to uncover the main themes related to the ideological construction of the term *Sunnah*. The results were presented as thematic narratives reflecting patterns of meaning in the respondents' religious practices. Finally, the sixth stage was data validation, conducted through methodological triangulation to compare the findings with other data sources in order to ensure consistency in the results. Member checking was also performed by reconfirming the data interpretations with respondents to ensure that the analysis accurately reflected their views and intentions.

Result and Discussion

This section presents the main findings of the study, which encompass three focal points of analysis: the Salafi movement's construction of the meaning of *Sunnah*, each informant's perception of the term, and the impact of this meaning construction on religious practices in the public sphere. The data were obtained through open-ended questionnaires distributed to two subunits of the study, with the primary focus on the Salafi movement, represented here by eight informants: SS, FZ, RWS, FUP, AB, AML, IRM, and AP.

The presentation of results is carried out in an integrative and thematic manner, not according to the order of respondents, but grouped according to the main themes that emerged during the analysis process. This approach was chosen to present the meanings and perceptions of *Sunnah* more comprehensively, comparatively, and contextually, while enabling a deeper reading of the discursive dynamics developing within the Salafi movement.

The Multidimensionality of the Meaning of Sunnah

In the corpus of Islamic scholarship, the term *Sunnah* does not refer to a single, fixed meaning. Rather, it is multidimensional and contextual, depending on the epistemological framework of each discipline. In the science of ḥadīth, *Sunnah*

is understood as everything originating from the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, whether in the form of words, actions, tacit approvals (*taqrīr*), or his personal qualities and character (Al-Baghdādī, 2006). In the field of *uṣūl al-fiqh*, *Sunnah* is defined as the second source of law after the Qur'an, encompassing the Prophet's sayings, actions, and approvals that serve as a basis for legal rulings (Al-Āmidī, 2003). Meanwhile, in the discipline of *fiqh*, *Sunnah* refers to acts of worship that, when performed, are rewarded, and when omitted, incur no sin (An-Nawāwī, 2009).

These definitional differences indicate that each discipline emphasizes particular aspects of the life of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. Consequently, the meaning of *Sunnah* is contextual, shaped by the scholarly objectives of each field. A ḥadīth scholar understands *Sunnah* comprehensively, without necessarily linking it to legal rulings. In contrast, a *faqīh* interprets *Sunnah* in a more limited sense, as recommended acts that are not obligatory, such as fasting on Mondays and Thursdays or performing *rawātib* prayers.

The diversity of meanings of *Sunnah* is also reflected in the respondents' perspectives. For instance, *Sunnah* was defined based on a ḥadīth as *mā udhīfa ilā an-nabī min qawlin aw fi'lin aw taqrīrin aw ṣifah*—that is, everything attributed to the Prophet, whether in the form of speech, action, tacit approval, or personal attributes (SS, 2025). Another respondent interpreted *Sunnah* as an act that is rewarded when performed and incurs no sin when omitted (FZ, 2025). There were also those who described *Sunnah* as the complete representation of the Prophet's person, encompassing his speech, actions, physical characteristics, and moral character (AML, 2025). Meanwhile, another respondent viewed *Sunnah* as a rule or tradition that serves as a guide in the socio-religious life of the community (RWS, 2025).

Thus, *Sunnah* is a complex and flexible concept, open to various forms of interpretation. It can function as a source of law, a social tradition, or a model of exemplary conduct from the life of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, depending on the context and perspective applied.

Perceptions of the Use of the Term Sunnah

In contemporary religious practice, *Sunnah* has undergone an expansion of function, serving as both a marker of social identity and a strategy for symbolic representation. For instance, the term *Sunnah* is used within the context of *da'wah*, yet boundaries are set to prevent its indiscriminate use in the commercial sector, as this is feared to diminish its meaning (SS, 2025). This concern aligns with the findings of Zehra and Minton, which indicate that religious consumers tend to reject the use of religious symbols or terms if perceived as insincere or merely a marketing strategy (Zehra & Minton, 2020). In this context, the use of *Sunnah* in commercial domains not only risks generating negative perceptions but may also reduce its sacred value.

Furthermore, the use of the term *Sunnah* can generally be categorized as *mubāḥ* (permissible), provided that it does not contradict the principles of Islamic law and aims to revive the spirit of religiosity (FZ, 2025). In addition, the use of the term *Sunnah* should take into account *niyyah* (intention) and *maṣlahah* (benefit),

given that the label is perceived as having the potential to introduce alternative products aligned with Islamic values while also serving as a symbol of resistance against the dominance of non-Muslim products (RWS, 2025). These perspectives are consistent with the findings of Zehra and Minton (2020), which indicate that the use of religious terminology in marketing can be an effective strategy to reach religious consumer segments. However, the success of such a strategy is highly dependent on the perceived sincerity of its application. If perceived as manipulative or merely an exploitation of religious symbols, this strategy may instead generate negative perceptions among consumers.

On the one hand, criticism of the phenomenon of using the term *Sunnah* was also voiced by several respondents. One of them expressed concern over the tendency of certain parties to misuse the term for personal gain, without considering its proper meaning and substance (AML, 2025). Such practices are considered to have the potential to create confusion within society, particularly among the general public. On the other hand, another respondent acknowledged that the term *Sunnah* indeed possesses a distinctive appeal as an effective branding strategy, primarily because it can foster a religious image (AB, 2025; FUP, 2025). Nevertheless, they also emphasized that the use of the term should still take into account substantive relevance as well as public sensitivity.

This concern aligns with the findings of Islam et al. (2021), which indicate that the use of religious symbols in marketing strategies can be effective in building consumer trust and loyalty. However, such effectiveness is not always accompanied by a genuine commitment to the spiritual values represented by those symbols. In this context, Heryanto (2015) offers a sharp critique of what he calls the "hypervisibility" of religious symbols in the public sphere, which are often exploited within the framework of the religious market, wherein piety is reduced to a commodity that is packaged and sold like any other consumer product. This phenomenon suggests that the term *Sunnah* has become an object of contestation, whose meaning is reproduced within commercial spaces for market interests.

In the context of Indonesia's religiously, culturally, and ethnically diverse society, the attachment of religious symbols such as *Sunnah* cannot be separated from broader social implications. Sandikci and Ger emphasize that religious symbols embedded in a product are not merely a marketing strategy but also constitute part of the politics of representation (Sandikci & Ger, 2011). Consequently, the use of such symbols shapes societal perceptions of the boundaries of identity, including determining who is considered "inside" and who is positioned "outside" a given group.

Inconsistencies in the Meaning and Use of the Term Sunnah

Although the Salafī group has provided a relatively comprehensive and well-argued definition of *Sunnah*, there remains an inconsistency between their conceptual understanding and their responses to the actual use of the term in the public sphere.

Theoretical Concept vs. Branding Practice

The Salafī group explicitly defines *Sunnah* as everything originating from the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, whether in the form of his sayings, actions, approvals, or personal attributes. Nevertheless, in practice, they tend to tolerate, and even support, the use of the term *Sunnah* in the public sphere as part of a community identification strategy. Such support is intended to make it easier for those adhering to the *manhaj salaf* to identify products perceived as aligned with their principles (AML, 2025; FZ, 2025; RWS, 2025; SS, 2025).

Thus, the Salafī group positions itself as the sole authority in determining who is entitled to use the term *Sunnah*. This stance reflects what Fairclough has argued—that discourse functions not only as a means of communication, but also as a tool for constructing and maintaining ideological dominance, wherein meaning is produced, defined, and controlled by particular groups (Fairclough, 2013). Through such a strategy, the Salafī group not only claims authority over the meaning of *Sunnah* but also seeks to shape the ideal identity of Muslims according to their own version.

The inconsistency in the Salafī group's stance is evident in various statements and practices. On the one hand, for instance, they strongly criticize the commodification of religion and condemn those who use the term *Sunnah* for personal gain (AML, 2025). On the other hand, the labeling of *Sunnah* in the commercial sphere can function as a tool for affirming religious identity. Another respondent stated that the use of the term *Sunnah* signifies affiliation with a group committed to the principle of *qāla Allāh, qāla al-Rasūl*—that is, adherence to the revelation of Allah and the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ (SS, 2025).

Nevertheless, such a view is not entirely consistent when compared to the findings of previous studies. Putra, Sayuti, and Rahim point out that the Salafī group often exhibits inconsistency in applying this principle. For example, although they openly reject *bid'ah* or innovation in religious practice, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic they nonetheless accepted a number of new practices such as maintaining physical distance during prayer, wearing masks, and referring to medical decisions based on considerations of *maṣlahah* and *qiyās*. This phenomenon reinforces the impression that their absolute claim of adherence to *qāla Allāh* and *qāla al-Rasūl* is not fully realized in practice (Putra et al., 2024).

A similar view was expressed by one respondent, who stated that the use of the term *Sunnah* is essentially *mubāh* as long as there is no explicit *shar'ī* prohibition and it contains an element of *maṣlahah* (FZ, 2025). However, the respondent did not provide a clear limitation regarding the scope of the intended *maṣlahah*. As a result, the *maṣlahah* principle employed risks becoming overly flexible and subject to adjustment for particular interests, including manipulative justification. Ironically, in other contexts, the Salafī group frequently condemns the religious practices of other groups as *bid'ah*, merely because such practices lack a direct precedent from the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ.

Claim of Purity vs. Practice of Exclusivism

The use of the term *Sunnah* is often interpreted as an effort to build consumer credibility and trust, particularly when the content and practices offered are claimed to reflect Islamic teachings that are “purely in accordance with the Qur’an and the Sunnah” (AB, 2025; FUP, 2025; IRM, 2025). However, in practice, such claims of doctrinal purity tend to give rise to an exclusivist tendency—namely, the assumption that only groups or products labeled *Sunnah* genuinely represent the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. Such an attitude constructs symbolic boundaries between “the correct” and “the deviant.”

A similar finding is presented by Nirzalin and Febriandi (2022), who demonstrate that exclusivism in religious practice contributes to the growth of intolerance, as well as the tendency to stigmatize other groups as deviant. This pattern is also evident in the construction of the meaning of *Sunnah*, which is narrowly framed as the property of groups claiming to follow a “pure” version of Islam based on the Qur’an and the Sunnah.

Semantic Shift in the Meaning of Sunnah

Based on the field findings, the semantic shift in the term *Sunnah* can be classified into several forms:

Generalization

Generalization refers to the process in which the meaning of a word expands from its original sense to encompass new entities or contexts that were previously excluded (Chaer, 2012). In this context, the term *Sunnah*, which originally referred to the teachings, sayings, and actions of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, is now used to name various products, services, or institutions that have no direct connection to prophetic practices but are associated with Islamic values and piety. Concrete examples of this phenomenon can be found in commercial labels such as *Laundry Sunnah*, *Sekolah Sunnah* (“Sunnah School”), and *Kopi Sunnah* (“Sunnah Coffee”), which employ the term as part of a religious branding strategy to project an Islamic and sharia-compliant image.

This phenomenon reflects what Heryanto refers to as *pop-Islamism*—the tendency to package Islamic symbols, including religious terms, as part of market commodities (Heryanto, 2015). From a pragmatic perspective, this can also be understood as a form of *indexicality*, namely the use of linguistic signs that not only carry denotative meaning but also signal a particular social identity or ideology (Silverstein, 2003). In this regard, the use of the label *Sunnah* functions as an index of religious identity, implicitly suggesting that the product or service bearing the label is more in line with Islamic teachings compared to similar products that do not employ religious branding.

Narrowing

Narrowing occurs when a term that was originally general in scope becomes restricted in its usage, so that its meaning is limited to a particular domain or group (Chaer, 2012). In this case, the term *Sunnah* undergoes narrowing to function as an exclusive identity associated with the Salafi group. This phenomenon is evident in

the use of expressions such as *ustaz Sunnah* (“Sunnah preacher”) or *kajian Sunnah* (“Sunnah study circle”), which implicitly signal affiliation to a particular school of thought or *manhaj* within Islam.

As a result, *Sunnah* is no longer generally understood as the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ that serve as a reference for all Muslims, but has instead been subjected to ideological labeling, turning it into a symbol of exclusivity for a particular group. This shift affirms that language functions not only as a means of communication but also as an arena for the contestation of identity and symbolic authority (Fairclough, 2013).

Such narrowing of meaning can be interpreted as an attempt to monopolize a religious term in order to strengthen ideological legitimacy while simultaneously delegitimizing other groups. In this context, *Sunnah* has been transformed from a collective Islamic symbol into a *boundary marker*—a symbolic demarcation used in religious discourse to distinguish the “true” group from “the others.”

In this context, the term *Sunnah* has undergone a transformation from a collective Islamic symbol into a *boundary marker*—a symbolic demarcation employed in religious discourse to distinguish the “true” group from “the others.”

Amelioration

Amelioration refers to the process by which a word undergoes an improvement in connotation, shifting from a neutral or ordinary meaning to one that carries more positive and prestigious associations (Chaer, 2012). In this context, the term *Sunnah* has undergone a semantic shift that associates it with religiosity, honesty, and adherence to Islamic law. Products such as *Laundry Sunnah*, for instance, are often perceived as more *shar’i* (in compliance with Islamic law), more trustworthy, and more reliable compared to similar services that do not employ the label.

Thus, *Sunnah* has undergone a re-semantization into a form of symbolic branding that imbues positive values in Muslim consumers. This phenomenon reflects what Heryanto describes as the transformation of religious symbols into the public sphere, wherein Islamic values are marketed through visual and narrative forms that are easily recognizable to society (Heryanto, 2015).

In addition to serving as a symbol of goodness, the term *Sunnah* also functions as a form of *ideological investment*, whereby a term is utilized to strengthen the social or economic position of certain groups (Fairclough, 2001). In this sense, the use of *Sunnah* not only represents religious values but also serves as a strategic instrument for building trust and loyalty within the Muslim market.

Peyoration

Peyoration refers to the process in which a word undergoes semantic degradation, shifting from an originally positive or neutral meaning to one with negative connotations (Chaer, 2012). In this context, the term *Sunnah* has not only experienced narrowing or broadening but has also undergone distortion when used manipulatively for ideological or commercial purposes. One respondent, for instance, criticized parties who deviate from the substance of the teachings of

Prophet Muhammad ﷺ yet continue to appropriate the *Sunnah* label to create an Islamic impression and secure religious legitimacy in the public eye (AML, 2025).

This phenomenon reflects a degradation of meaning, whereby *Sunnah* is reduced to a tool for supporting specific agendas, whether in the form of religious commodification or as a means to unilaterally claim religious truth. In some cases, the term has even been employed to attack other groups deemed inconsistent with the principles upheld by those using the label. Thus, *Sunnah* functions not only as an instrument of exclusivism but also as a potential ideological weapon that fosters social fragmentation within the Muslim community.

Metonymy

Metonymy is a semantic shift that occurs when a meaning is transferred due to an associative relationship between one element and another (Chaer, 2012). In this context, the term *Sunnah* has undergone metonymization—its meaning shifting from the entirety of the Prophet Muhammad’s ﷺ teachings to a set of performative symbols associated with a particular group. Examples include a long beard, trousers worn above the ankles, or a harsh preaching style marked by frequent criticism of *Ahl al-Bid’ah*, which then come to be perceived as representative of *Sunnah* itself.

In reality, such symbols constitute only a small fraction of the overall teachings of the Prophet and should not be claimed as the essence of *Sunnah*. This process exemplifies metonymization, where a part (a symbol) is taken to represent the whole (the teachings). It also reflects a form of ideological symbolization, in which a term’s meaning is narrowed to specific outward forms in order to assert group identity and reinforce social differentiation (Van Dijk, 2006).

As Yusuf (2019), emphasizes, symbols such as dress style or preaching manner are often associated with the identity of truth, whereas the substance of the Prophet’s mission placed greater emphasis on courtesy, inclusivity, and communicative engagement. Thus, in this context, *Sunnah* has been reduced to a symbol of group exclusivity—one that highlights distinctions rather than the substantive values it originally embodied.

Effects of the Semantic Shift of the Term Sunnah

The semantic shift of the term *Sunnah*—from its original normative, spiritual, and legal dimensions to a symbol of identity, commodity, and ideology—has had far-reaching impacts on various aspects of religious and social life. These effects can be categorized into several domains:

Religious Polarization and Exclusivism

The shift in the meaning of *Sunnah* into a symbol of identity and ideology has contributed to the emergence of polarization and exclusivism among fellow Muslims. What was once inclusive—*Sunnah* as part of the universal teachings of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ—has often been narrowed to belong to a particular group. This is evident in the use of labels such as “ustaz Sunnah” (Sunnah teacher), “sekolah Sunnah” (Sunnah school), or “kajian Sunnah” (Sunnah study group),

which implicitly suggest that others are not following the Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ teachings correctly.

As a result, a dichotomy arises between those who claim to follow the *Sunnah* and those who do not, potentially undermining *ukhuwah islamiyah* (Islamic brotherhood) and fostering prejudice against groups with differing orientations. This phenomenon illustrates that language production is not merely a tool of communication but also a means of shaping power relations (Fairclough, 2013). In this context, the *Sunnah* label functions as an “ideological stamp” produced to construct group superiority and to define religious boundaries.

Commodification of Religious Symbols

The shift in the meaning of *Sunnah* has also generated a cultural effect in the form of the commodification of religious symbols. In this context, *Sunnah* no longer solely refers to the substantive teachings of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, but is reduced to a pragmatic and worldly commercial branding instrument. This phenomenon is evident in the proliferation of the *Sunnah* label on commercial products such as *Laundry Sunnah*, which have no direct connection to prophetic values.

Such practices are regarded as a form of “selling religion cheaply,” in which values that should be noble are instead exploited to gain worldly profit. According to some perspectives, this condition not only dilutes public understanding of the meaning of *Sunnah* but also risks reducing it to a mere promotional tool (AML, 2025; SLI, 2025).

This symptom can be explained through the theory of religious commodification, namely the process in which sacred symbols are transformed into objects that can be sold and consumed (Einstein, 2007). As Baudrillard (1998) argues, in a consumerist society, the meaning of a symbol is no longer determined by its ideological substance but by its exchange value and marketability. Oleh Therefore, the use of the *Sunnah* label in commercial spaces does not merely reflect religious values but also constitutes a marketing strategy wrapped in a religious nuance.

Instrumentalization of Sunnah in Identity Politics

The semantic shift of *Sunnah* has also produced significant ideological implications, particularly in the context of religious identity politics. In this regard, the term *Sunnah* is employed as a marker of specific ideological affiliation. This practice reflects what Castells (2013) describes as *identity-based mobilization*, namely the use of religious symbols to foster internal solidarity while simultaneously reinforcing boundaries against out-groups

In this context, *Sunnah* is utilized to reinforce exclusive truth claims, thereby constructing a dichotomy between “those of us who follow the *Sunnah*” and “those who do not.” As such, *Sunnah* has undergone a process of ideologization—where a religious term is reduced to a symbolic weapon in the contestation of religious authority and the representation of Islamic truth in the public sphere.

Reduction of the Substantive Dimension of Religious Teachings

The semantic shift of *Sunnah* from a substantive to a symbolic dimension also has significant implications for theological and scholarly aspects. Based on the findings of this study, *Sunnah* tends to be reduced to outward manifestations such as beards, traditional garments, or strict preaching styles, which obscure the essence of the Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ teachings that emphasize ethics, wisdom, and compassion.

According to Al-Attas (2023), this phenomenon is part of what he terms the *loss of adab*, referring to the decline of the Muslim community due to a failure to understand knowledge hierarchically and substantively. When physical symbols become the primary parameter of religiosity, the orientation toward knowledge becomes shallow. In this context, *Sunnah* is no longer understood as an ethical and epistemological principle but is reduced to a visual and symbolic identity.

Confusion and Fatigue Among Laypeople

The increasingly widespread, ambiguous, and unstandardized use of the term *Sunnah* has the potential to create confusion among lay members of society. Many of them lack the scholarly capacity to distinguish between *Sunnah* as the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and *Sunnah* as a symbol of a particular group or even as a commercial brand.

This phenomenon produces psychosocial implications such as fatigue and even resistance toward the term *Sunnah* itself. This aligns with Bauman's concept of *meaninglessness*, which describes situations in which religious terms lose their referential certainty due to overly free and context-detached usage (Bauman, 2007). When the term *Sunnah* is used inconsistently and attached to various practices or symbols that may even conflict with one another, laypeople can experience cognitive dissonance, i.e., tension between the normative understanding they uphold and the symbolic reality they encounter.

Conclusion

This study confirms that the term *Sunnah* is not a static or final concept, but rather contextual, depending on the disciplinary framework and surrounding discourse. The findings indicate that *Sunnah*, which was initially part of normative authority within Islamic teachings, has undergone significant transformation in contemporary religious discourse, particularly within the Salafī group.

Within this group, *Sunnah* has expanded its function as a symbol of identity and a means of representing religious propagation (*dakwah*), manifested through various media such as social media account names, product brands, and digital religious narratives. This approach reflects efforts to revitalize religious values amid modernity, while simultaneously carrying the risk of ideological appropriation and commodification of meaning.

Semantically, the term *Sunnah* has undergone five forms of meaning change: generalization, specialization, amelioration, pejoration, and metonymy. These shifts reflect a transition from theological dimensions toward ideological and commercial functions, positioning *Sunnah* as a symbol in contests of identity and authority

within the Islamic public sphere. This underscores that the production of religious meaning is closely intertwined with dynamics of power, ideology, and market forces.

In response to this phenomenon, an educational and critical approach is required, emphasizing the importance of substantive understanding of *Sunnah* rather than merely as a marker of group identity. This study opens avenues for further research on the multimodal representation of *Sunnah* in social media, public perceptions of Islamic-labeled brands, and the relationship between religious symbols, authority, and consumerism in contemporary Muslim societies.

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