# Social Cognition and Disinformation: A Psychosocial Reading of the Ratna Sarumpaet Case

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| Article Info | ABSTRACT |
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| | This study aims to analyze the dynamics of social cognition in the case of public deception committed by Ratna Sarumpaet in 2018. Using a qualitative case study approach and a social cognition theoretical framework, this study examines how the public forms perceptions, makes social attributions, and how cognitive schemas and biases play a role in responding to narratives presented by public actors. The analysis reveals that public acceptance of false narratives is significantly influenced by existing social schemas, confirmation bias, representative heuristics, and social identity factors. This case underscores the importance of understanding social cognition processes in the digital age, where information spreads rapidly and perceptions are shaped within social interaction spaces saturated with emotions and ideological interests. This study recommends strengthening media literacy and developing critical awareness as preventive measures against disinformation and public opinion manipulation.<br><br>*This is an open access article under the* CC BY-SA *license.* |

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Social cognition is a branch of social psychology that studies how individuals process, store, and apply information about other people and social situations. In social life, perceptions, interpretations, and evaluations of social behavior are often not objective but influenced by schemas, attributions, and biases inherent in individual cognition [1]. Social cognition not only shapes an individual's understanding of social reality but also influences actions and reactions in various contexts, including politics, media, and culture. Social cognition is a critical area of social psychology that examines how individuals process, store, and apply information about others and social situations. It emphasizes the subjective nature of social perception, where personal biases, schemas, and attributions significantly influence how social information is interpreted and acted upon. This field integrates insights from various disciplines,

including psychology, neuroscience, and cultural studies, to understand the cognitive processes underlying social interactions. The following sections delve into key aspects of social cognition, highlighting its impact on social behavior and perception. Social cognition involves cognitive structures such as schemas, scripts, and stereotypes that help individuals organize and interpret social information efficiently [2], [3]. These mental frameworks allow for quick judgments and decisions, often relying on heuristics, which are mental shortcuts that simplify complex social realities [3]. The subjective nature of social cognition means that perceptions are often influenced by personal biases, emotions, and motivations, rather than objective reality [4], [5]. Automatic inferences and egocentric projections are common, where individuals project their own feelings and beliefs onto others, shaping their social impressions [5]. Cultural conditioning plays a significant role in shaping social cognition, leading to variations in person perception across different cultural contexts [2], [5]. Cross-cultural psychology examines how cultural norms and values influence the way individuals interpret social cues and interact with others [2]. Social cognition research distinguishes between implicit and explicit cognitive processes, with recent studies exploring the neural basis of these processes [4]. Implicit processes are automatic and often unconscious, while explicit processes involve deliberate and conscious thought [4].

One case that reflects the complexity of social cognition dynamics in Indonesian society is the public deception controversy involving Ratna Sarumpaet in 2018. This case attracted widespread attention because it involved the manipulation of personal information, which was then framed as an act of violence by certain parties before ultimately being exposed as a lie. The public's swift, widespread, and emotionally charged reaction to Ratna's initial confession reflects how social attribution processes, the role of emotions, and cognitive biases operate in evaluating an event. The Ratna Sarumpaet hoax case in 2018 exemplifies the intricate dynamics of social cognition in Indonesian society, particularly in the context of media influence and public perception. This incident, where Ratna falsely claimed to have been assaulted, was rapidly disseminated and believed by the public, highlighting the role of cognitive biases and emotional responses in shaping social attribution processes. The case underscores how misinformation can be amplified by media and social networks, leading to widespread public reaction before the truth is uncovered. This situation illustrates the complex interplay between media framing, public emotion, and cognitive biases in evaluating events. Media outlets like Detik.com and Tribunnews.com played a significant role in framing the hoax, often prioritizing sensationalism and high traffic over factual accuracy [6], [7]. The framing analysis revealed that these media platforms relied heavily on social media narratives, which contributed to the spread of misinformation (Sundari & Salamah, 2019). Social media platforms, particularly Twitter, were instrumental in the rapid dissemination of the hoax, with hashtags like #RatnaMilikSiapa facilitating widespread discussion and opinion formation [8]. The Social Network Analysis (SNA) identified key influencers who played a pivotal role in spreading the hoax, highlighting the power of social media in shaping public discourse [8]. The public's swift and emotional reaction to the hoax reflects cognitive biases, such as the tendency to accept information that aligns with pre-existing beliefs or emotions [9]. The case also demonstrates how emotional narratives can overshadow factual analysis,

leading to premature conclusions and widespread misinformation [10].

In this context, an important question arises: how can people quickly believe false narratives, and how do individual cognitive structures and social dynamics encourage the formation of false conclusions? The case study of Ratna Sarumpaet provides important insights into the process of social cognition, especially in the digital age, which is characterized by the rapid flow of information that is often unverified. Through this case study approach, this paper seeks to explore key concepts in social cognition, such as schemas, attribution, self-perception, and social perception, to understand the patterns of thinking, decision-making, and social reactions that arose in the Ratna Sarumpaet incident.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Definition of Social Cognition

Social cognition is a complex process that involves understanding and interpreting the social world through mental processes. It is influenced by various factors, including personal experiences, motivations, and cognitive schemas. In modern society, where information flows rapidly, social cognition plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions and understanding of reality. This process often relies on quick, heuristic-based inferences, which can lead to the formation of public perceptions without thorough verification, as seen in the case of Ratna Sarumpaet. Social cognition involves cognitive structures such as schemas and mental representations that help individuals process social information efficiently [2], [11]. These structures allow for quick inferences and judgments about others' psychological states, motivations, and intentions [12]. Social cognition often operates automatically, with individuals making rapid, effortless inferences based on appearance and behavior cues [5]. Heuristics, or mental shortcuts, are commonly used to simplify complex social information, although they can lead to biases and errors in judgment [1]. Cultural conditioning significantly shapes social cognition, leading to variations in person perception across different cultural contexts [5]. Social environments and interpersonal relationships also influence how social information is processed and understood [11]. In a fast-paced information environment, social cognition can lead to the rapid formation of public perceptions, sometimes based on incomplete or unverified information [2]. This highlights the importance of critical thinking and verification in processing social information to avoid misconceptions and misinformation.

### 2.2 Social Schemes and Cognitive Biases

Schemas are mental frameworks that help individuals organize and interpret information quickly, yet they can also lead to biases

such as confirmation bias, where people favor data aligning with their prior beliefs. In the case of Ratna Sarumpaet, the public's rapid conclusion that she was a victim of violence reflects a political repression schema, reinforced by her known opposition to the government. This demonstrates how schemas and biases can shape public perception. Social cognition encompasses the mental processes used to understand the social world, including the use of schemas to organize information and anticipate events [4]. These frameworks filter new information through past experiences and beliefs [4]. When individuals accept confirming evidence while ignoring contradictions, confirmation bias occurs [4], as seen when the public readily believed Ratna's narrative due to existing political schemas. Hostile attribution bias (HAB) — the tendency to perceive ambiguous actions as hostile — further illustrates how pre-existing schemas can distort interpretation, especially in politically charged contexts [13]. Additionally, social understanding involves both mirror matching and semantic analysis systems, both of which are susceptible to schema-driven biases [14], emphasizing the deep influence of cognitive structures on social judgment.

### 2.3 Social Attribution

The case of Ratna Sarumpaet highlights the dynamic nature of social attribution, where initial external attributions can shift to internal ones as new information emerges. Initially, the public believed her injuries were due to an attack related to her activism, but this changed to attributing dishonesty once it was revealed the injuries came from cosmetic surgery. This illustrates how social judgments are shaped by evolving narratives and the tension between internal and external attributions. Attribution theory classifies behavior causes into internal (personal traits) and external (situational factors) [15], while the fundamental attribution error (FAE) shows the common bias of overemphasizing dispositional factors [16]. The Sarumpaet case demonstrates how initial perceptions tied to political violence [15] shifted toward personal motives with the uncovering of new facts [17]. Studies show that internal cues often carry more weight in social judgments, and the discounting principle explains how strong internal explanations reduce the impact of situational factors [17].

### 2.4 Social Perception and Heuristics

Social perception is a complex process shaped by heuristics—mental shortcuts that simplify decision-making under uncertainty. Two influential heuristics in this domain are the availability and representativeness heuristics,

both of which played a significant role in shaping public perception of Ratna Sarumpaet. The availability heuristic led the public to quickly believe she was a victim of violence, as similar cases involving activists were frequently reported and easily recalled [18], [19]. This bias often results in overestimating the likelihood of memorable or recent events [20]. Simultaneously, the representativeness heuristic caused people to associate her facial injuries with violence rather than a medical procedure, based on the stereotypical prototype of injury from assault [18], [19], leading to misjudgment by ignoring statistical realities [20]. Moreover, faces are powerful social stimuli; people often form rapid impressions from facial appearance, which, although instinctive, are not always accurate [21]. In Sarumpaet's case, visible injuries triggered these heuristic-based perceptions, reinforcing a narrative that did not align with the facts [21].

### 2.5 *Self-Perception and Social Identity*

Self-perception theory posits that individuals form an understanding of themselves by observing their own behavior, particularly when internal cues are ambiguous. In the case of Ratna Sarumpaet's assertion of being beaten, this theory suggests her behavior and claims may have been part of an effort to shape her identity as a victim, potentially to gain sympathy or reinforce her position in political discourse. Individuals often infer their mental states by analyzing their actions and the context around them, especially when introspection is unreliable [22]. This aligns with impression management theory, which emphasizes how individuals strategically present themselves to influence others' perceptions [23]. Moreover, social identity theory explains how individuals categorize themselves and others into "ingroup" and "outgroup," and Ratna's narrative may have activated group loyalty, prompting her supporters to accept her claims uncritically because she was seen as part of their ideological ingroup [24]. Social identity can shape causal attributions, leading individuals to blame external factors and defend ingroup members regardless of contrary evidence. The perception and claiming of discrimination are also influenced by social and situational factors; while many may avoid publicly claiming victimhood due to fear of negative judgment, Ratna's identity as a political activist may have reduced these social costs, making her narrative more acceptable among her supporters [25].

## 3 METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore the dynamics of social cognition in the Ratna Sarumpaet case. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to conduct an in-depth analysis of specific social events by considering the context, actors, narratives, and meaning constructions involved (Yin, 2014).

The main focus is to understand how social perceptions are formed, how attributions are made by the public, and how biases and cognitive schemas work in responding to viral information. The primary data sources in this study come from online news documentation, public interview recordings, official statements, and social media content that disseminated and responded to the news of Ratna Sarumpaet's beating. The data was collected using documentation techniques and analyzed thematically using a social cognition approach as a theoretical framework. The analysis highlighted how narratives developed, how the public formed perceptions, and how schemas and heuristics influenced judgments about the event.

The validity of this research is ensured through data triangulation, which involves comparing various sources of information (news media, social media posts, and public documents) to gain a comprehensive understanding. Additionally, theoretical reflection is used to connect field findings with key concepts in social cognition, such as attribution, social perception, and schemas. The researchers also strive to maintain objectivity by critically analyzing the ideological positions of the media or actors involved in the dissemination of narratives. Thus, this approach not only provides a rich contextual understanding but also allows for an in-depth interpretation of

the cognitive and social patterns that emerge in this case.

## 4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Case Analysis

The Ratna Sarumpaet case began in early October 2018 when she claimed to have been beaten by unknown people in Bandung. The narrative quickly spread on social media and received widespread responses from various public figures, politicians, activists, and the general public. Some parties condemned the alleged violence experienced by Ratna, while others questioned the validity of her story. Within a short period of time, the case took a drastic turn after the police revealed that the injuries on Ratna's face were not the result of physical violence but rather a liposuction procedure at a plastic surgery clinic in Jakarta.

This phenomenon is interesting to examine from a social cognition perspective. The public, who initially sympathized with Ratna, tended to accept the claims of violence without much question. The social schema of activists as victims of repression, coupled with the political context leading up to the 2019 elections, created a cognitive framework that allowed the narrative to be accepted instantly. As explained in schema theory, individuals tend to interpret new information based on their existing knowledge structures. In this case, Ratna is perceived as a vocal opposition figure, so the claim of violence is considered plausible within the framework of the ongoing political conflict.

On the other hand, cognitive biases such as confirmation bias also reinforce the acceptance of this false story. Ratna's supporters or those with aligned ideological positions tend to immediately believe the narrative because it aligns with their political beliefs. Information that is inconsistent or contradictory to the narrative is ignored or

even suspected as an attempt at suppression by those in power.

This shows how social cognition is often selective and not neutral, especially when emotions and social identity come into play. Furthermore, emotional responses to this event also accelerated the process of inaccurate social attribution. Before factual verification, many parties immediately attributed the incident to external factors, namely that the beating was carried out by certain political actors as a form of intimidation. When the facts were revealed, public attributions shifted to internal attributions—linking Ratna's behavior to her personality or manipulative intentions. This shift is in line with the basic principles of attribution theory: judgments about other people's behavior are strongly influenced by available contextual information and are often prone to bias. Social perception and heuristics were also very evident in this case.

Many people made judgments based solely on the appearance of Ratna's wounds or the emotional narrative presented without seeking further verification. The representativeness heuristic led the public to equate the wounds on her face with physical violence, while the availability heuristic caused people to quickly associate this case with violence against activists, as similar incidents had occurred previously and were easily remembered.

From the perpetrator's perspective, self-perception theory can also be used to explain why Ratna constructed this narrative. By framing herself as a victim, she not only creates a certain image in the public eye but also reinforces her identity as an activist who has experienced repression. Within the framework of social identity theory, the support she receives from her "ingroup" demonstrates how collective identity influences the process of forming attitudes toward an event.

Finally, this case shows that in a digitally connected society, information is not only consumed passively, but also produced and reposted in a social ecosystem full of emotions, identities, and political interests. The social cognition process in this event cannot be separated from the socio-political context, the media, and the dynamics of the groups involved.

### 4.2 Discussion

The analysis of the Ratna Sarumpaet case shows how key concepts in social cognition work in a real-world context involving public opinion, the media, and political narratives. The main findings of this study indicate that public perceptions are strongly influenced by cognitive schemas, heuristics, and attribution processes formed from partial information in the public sphere. Social schema theory explains that the public tends to interpret events through existing knowledge frameworks. In Ratna's case, her identity as an opposition activist who frequently criticizes the government strengthened the credibility of her claims in the eyes of the ideologically aligned public. This schema not only simplifies information but also reinforces stereotypes and triggers automatic social responses to events that align with group expectations.

Furthermore, cognitive biases such as confirmation bias accelerate the spread of unverified information. People tend to accept narratives that align with their views and disregard conflicting information, especially in digital environments saturated with filter bubbles and echo chambers. This exacerbates vulnerability to emotional or symbolic information manipulation. The process of social attribution also plays a significant role in shaping public opinion. When claims of

violence arise, people are quick to make external attributions to politically opposed parties. However, when lies are exposed, moral sanctions are shifted to Ratna as an individual, demonstrating the volatility of social judgments in a reactive digital space.

Another important aspect is the role of representative heuristics and availability heuristics in shaping public perceptions. The public is more likely to believe the visual injuries on Ratna's face because they mentally associate them with violence rather than medical procedures, without conducting a thorough evaluation. This reflects limitations in the rational processing of social information. Additionally, self-perception theory and social identity theory explain how Ratna positions herself as a victim to gain sympathy from like-minded groups. These actions demonstrate how personal narratives can be constructed to reinforce collective identity, and how group loyalty can override objectivity in assessing an event. This overall dynamic underscore the complexity of social cognition in a digital society saturated with symbols and instant information.

Social cognition in contemporary society is not merely the result of internal individual processes, but is profoundly shaped by social, cultural, and political contexts that are increasingly mediated by digital technologies. In the digital age, cognition is influenced by rapid exchanges of visual information, emotionally charged narratives, and strong group affiliations, which complicate the development of a rational and critical public mindset. Digital media has deeply penetrated everyday life, transforming how people communicate, form identities, and disseminate knowledge on a global scale [26]. The swift spread of content via social media fosters subjective, automatic, and low-effort interpretations, often driven by superficial cues such as appearance and

behavior [5]. Moreover, cultural conditioning shapes social cognition by generating different perceptual norms across societies, where emotions, motives, and prior experiences play a central role in how people interpret social information [4]. These dynamics foster cognitive biases, dissonance, and psychological resistance that may offer mental shortcuts but hinder critical reasoning and openness to diverse perspectives [1]. Ultimately, the interaction between individual cognition and external social demands, especially in digitally saturated environments, presents a significant barrier to cultivating a society that is resilient against misinformation and capable of engaging in reasoned discourse [27].

This study underscores the importance of media literacy education and critical understanding of social cognitive processes, particularly in the face of the growing dominance of post-truth phenomena and identity politics. Without adequate understanding of how social cognition works, society will remain vulnerable to narrative manipulation and unfounded social conflicts.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The Ratna Sarumpaet case provides a clear illustration of how social cognition works in shaping public perceptions of an event. Schemas, biases, attributions, and cognitive heuristics play a central role in determining how people interpret and respond to information. When the narrative constructed is consistent with one's beliefs or social identity, the public tends to accept the information without verification. However, when narratives are proven false, perceptions shift drastically. This finding indicates that social cognition is dynamic, influenced by social-political contexts, and highly susceptible to manipulation. Therefore, understanding the cognitive mechanisms at

play in social domains is crucial for fostering a more critical, rational, and resilient society, particularly in the midst of the widespread use of social media in shaping public opinion.

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