

Head up, heart down—vertical placement matters

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Credit: Wikipedia/CC

The metaphor is an old one in Western civilization—the head represents rationality and the heart represents emotion. The link is often made in speech and literature by pointing at one's head (thinking) or at one's chest (feeling).

In the classic movie "The Wizard of Oz," for example, the tin man desires a heart because he is without emotions, and the scarecrow desires

a brain because he lacks intelligence.

University of Michigan marketing professor Aradhna Krishna shows this isn't just a linguistic construct. People make real-life associations with rationality and emotions when it comes to an advertisement's physical placement on a printed page or website.

In a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, Krishna and colleagues Luca Cian of the University of Virginia and Norbert Schwarz at the University of Southern California found that people more strongly resonate with rational messages when placed at the top of a page or display, and with emotional messages displayed toward the bottom.

"As children we can't fully grasp abstract concepts, so ideas like 'rationality' and 'feelings' are explained with something concrete like pointing to your head or heart," said Krishna, the Dwight F. Benton Professor of Marketing at U-M's Ross School of Business. "Our results show that this subconsciously affects the way we perceive reality as adults."

The authors ran a series of six studies that show people associate up with rational and down with emotional. Their studies suggest that marketing managers and designers should consider the rational/emotional impact of their message when placing products or information on a printed page or computer screen.

In one study, they showed test subjects food advertisements that made either a rational claim for the product or an emotional one. People were more likely to buy the food advertised when the rational claim was at the top and the [emotional appeal](#) at the bottom.

"If this was only a figure of speech, it shouldn't matter where you place the message," said Cian, who was a postdoctoral scholar at Krishna's

Sensory Marketing Laboratory. "The fact that it does shows this is an innate association, and marketers and designers should start paying attention to it."

Another experiment focused on a news website. More rational news categories, such as science, are preferred when their placement is higher on a website. Likewise, more emotional news categories like entertainment are preferred when placed in the lower part of a website.

In another study that could resonate in an election year, subjects were shown ads for a political candidate that highlighted either that person's passion or intelligence. People were significantly more likely to vote for the candidate when the message on intelligence was placed at the top, and the passion appeal was placed toward the bottom.

A real-world example is Shepard Fairey's iconic HOPE poster for the 2008 Obama campaign, which observed the metaphor-matching principle. The word "HOPE"—with its strong emotional association—is in the lower part of the image.

This may not have influenced people with strong prior opinions about Obama, the researchers say, but undecided voters might have developed a more positive attitude toward Obama than if the same slogan had been in the upper part.

Right now, Krishna and Cian say ads are "all over the place" in terms of where messages are placed. But their study with Schwarz shows that the marketing and design fields should take a closer look at how they create ads with emotional and rational messages.

More information: Positioning Rationality and Emotion: Rationality Is Up and Emotion Is Down. [www.aradhnakrishna.com/uploads ... lity and emotion.pdf](http://www.aradhnakrishna.com/uploads/lity_and_emotion.pdf)

Provided by University of Michigan

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