

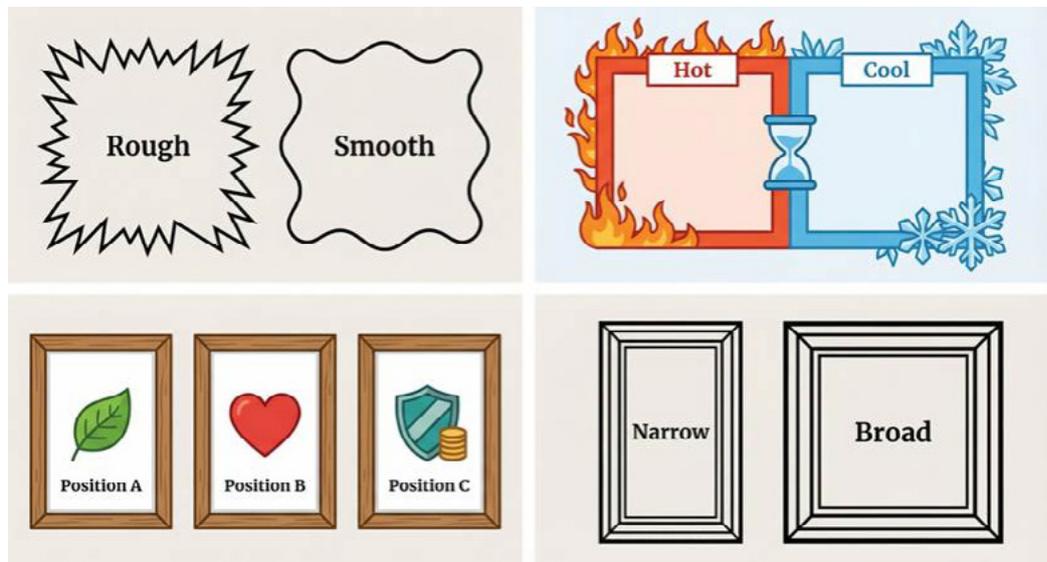


Policy Brief 2:13

Excerpt from the Swedish report Konsumtionens gränser. (The Limits of Consumption)

How We Frame Messages to Foster Engagement and Willingness to Change

When scientific information about climate, health, and social equity meet saturated media flows, facts and charts are not enough to spark engagement. My research shows that engagement is shaped by four dimensions of messages: their texture, temperature, position, and size. These are practical framing tools that make abstract sustainability goals personal, morally charged, and socially contagious.



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Texture and temperature

Texture describes how much resistance a message offers the reader. A smooth interpretive frame often relies on an established cultural way of seeing an issue. One example is the idea that sustainable consumption can be achieved if con-



By calibrating texture, temperature, position, and scale within a shared flow, the message lands in a way that resonates with the gut, the heart, and the mind.

sumers simply pull themselves together, make a few individual green lifestyle choices, and adopt a bit less harmful technology. The rougher frame emphasizes that we need to consume far less overall; according to this frame, reducing consumption substantially requires that we increase pressure on politicians and industries, which otherwise will not implement the structural changes in environmental policy and markets that are needed. Although smoother frames are often well received, making the texture rougher, especially in problem-focused framing, can sometimes increase engagement.

In one study, lower secondary school boys browsed two brochures about fast food. The first brochure described fats and carbohydrates in neutral health terms. The second revealed, in a factual and unemotional way, how marketers strategically used misleading language in television advertising. This created a rougher frame around fast food companies' strategies, making companies appear, in the young readers' eyes, as if they were trying to fool us. The message reached an emotional temperature just below the boiling point, intense enough to elicit moral indignation but not so hot that the recipient boiled over into denial. The group reduced fast food consumption by 31 percent the following week.

However, the framing temperature can also become too high, producing the opposite effect. Swedish data from more than twenty-seven million deposit returns show that higher deposit refunds initially increase recycling, but if the refund increases too drastically, the action can feel bought, and recycling may fall again because there is no moral capital left to gain. The optimal temperature sits between duty and profit.

Position and size

Position concerns where focus is placed and how an agenda is set. A classic example is Amsterdam in the early 1980s. Activists painted white bicycle symbols in the middle of streets using plywood stencils, creating the illusion of a bike lane. Images spread through local media, headlines spoke about children being killed by cars, and suddenly, it was the car that appeared as the intruder, not the bicycle. Politicians who had previously seen car traffic as the backbone of modernity began to speak about children's right to safe mobility. This shift in position helped lay the groundwork for the infrastructure that makes Amsterdam a cycling city today.

Size refers to how narrowly or broadly a problem is framed. This is evident in the 2023 Nordic Nutrition Recommendations. Traditionally, these recommendations have focused on nutrients and health, but the latest revision has broadened the scope to include climate and biodiversity impacts. The process was far from smooth, with conflicts and concerns across industries and professional groups.

The four dimensions rarely work in isolation. The painted bicycle symbols would likely have had a limited impact without the temperature increase from headlines about child deaths. The fast-food experiment needed both social texture and a us-versus-them distinction to generate sufficient indignation. And the Nordic panel would have failed if it had stayed at a global perspective without shrinking the issue to people's breakfast tables. Practical applications



are observable across society, for example, when municipalities communicate car-free zones through lived experiences rather than emissions charts, or when reuse is promoted by highlighting craftsmanship and history rather than purely price-based comparisons.

When a message is framed so that its four dimensions elicit an emotional response that shakes but does not scare people into denial, places focus where identity matters, and shifts the problem's scale between the local and the planetary, sustainable consumption becomes not a burden but a source of pride and belonging.



Further reading – or ask questions using www.greenchat.se/eng

- Klintman, M. (2025). [Framing: The Social Art of Influence](#). Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Klintman, M. (2025). [A Lot to Chew On: Expanding the Frame of Nordic Nutrition Recommendations 2023 \(NNR2023\) to Embrace Health, Transparency and Ecological Sustainability](#). SSRN preprint.

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For further information, see:
www.sustainableconsumption.se/en

Reference to this text

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