

*Psychology*

# PACKAGING

*Nick Kolenda*

THE BEST  
**SIZE, SHAPE,  
MATERIAL &  
DESIGN** OF  
PRODUCT  
PACKAGES

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Packaging Psychology: The Best Size, Shape, Material, and  
Design of Product Packages

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# SIZE

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## Tall Packages Seem Larger

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Customers use height to estimate sizes.

Bottles of beer seem larger than cans of beer because customers fixate on the height (Raghubir Krishna, 1999).

However, elongated packages come with a drawback: Since these packages seem larger, customers buy less.

Researchers analyzed 20,000+ purchases of light beer. Turns out, customers buy cans at a 64% higher quantity than bottles (Yang & Raghubir, 2005).

**The Takeaway:** Tall packages might perform better for one-time purchases because they seem larger, but wider packages might perform better for bulk purchases because customers buy more.





## Tall Packages Seem Healthy and Luxurious

We're wired to see human traits in objects. It's called *anthropomorphism*.

Packaging is no exception.

Customers subconsciously compare packaging traits to humans, which can mold their perception of a brand—e.g., tall packages seem healthy because they remind customers of a tall and slender person (van Ooijen, Franssen, Verlegh, & Smit, 2017).



Tall packages seem luxurious, too. Participants believed that tall and thin people belonged in a higher socioeconomic class, and—in turn—they believed that tall packages would be more effective in high-end markets (Chen, Pang, Koo, & Patrick, 2020).







## Wide Packages Seem Heavier

Heavy objects are stable.

And customers erroneously believe the reverse: Stable objects seem heavier (Yang, Yan, & Raghurir, 2021).

Researchers varied stability for three food items—chips, chocolate, yogurt—by adjusting their orientations. The “stable” food seemed heavier, and participants were willing to pay a higher price (Yang, Yan, & Raghurir, 2021).



Selling yogurt? Wide packages should perform better for a rich and creamy brand because these containers seem heavier.



You can also manipulate the package shape. A “healthy” brand should shorten the width at the bottom of their package because this instability will make the container seem lighter.





## Small Packages Seem Dense and Powerful

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Products seem tighter and denser in small packages.

For example, coffee seems more intense and bitter from a narrow cup (Van Doorn et al., 2017).

Reasons:

- » **Condensed Average.** Imagine an averaged sized cup of coffee. If you see a smaller cup, you might conceptualize this transformation in two ways. The smaller cup is (1) a smaller sample from the average cup, or (2) a condensed version of the average cup. The second transformation will make the coffee seem more intense.
- » **Higher Price Per Unit.** Products in small packages are more expensive per unit, which inflates the perceived quality. Customers preferred the taste of Pringles chips from a small (vs. large) can because their expectations were higher (Yan, Sengupta, & Wyer Jr, 2014).
- » **Full Portion.** Participants preferred a 1 oz. serving of Gatorade when it came from an individual packet (vs. a





32 oz. container; Ilyuk & Block, 2016). Customers prefer individual servings because they seem like a full portion. When you extract a serving from a large inventory, it feels like a partial serving (and thus less effective). Perhaps that's why some brands of laundry detergent are now selling individual capsules (e.g., Tide Pods).





SIZE

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## Round Packages Seem Sweet and Feminine

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Customers evaluate brands by comparing them to humans.

For example, shapes imply gender: Angularity seems masculine, while roundness seems feminine because of evolutionary roots (e.g., female bodies are more curved; see Van Tilburg, Lieven, Herrmann, & Townsend, 2015).

In turn, this belief affects packaging: Angular packages seem masculine, while round packages seem feminine (Pang & Ding, 2021).

Gender has other traits, too. Round packages seem feminine, so they inherit feminine traits, such as sweetness (Velasco, Salgado-Montejo, Marmolejo-Ramos, & Spence, 2014). Choose a round package for sweet chocolate, yet an angular package for spicy food.





## Maintain the Full Shape of Your Package

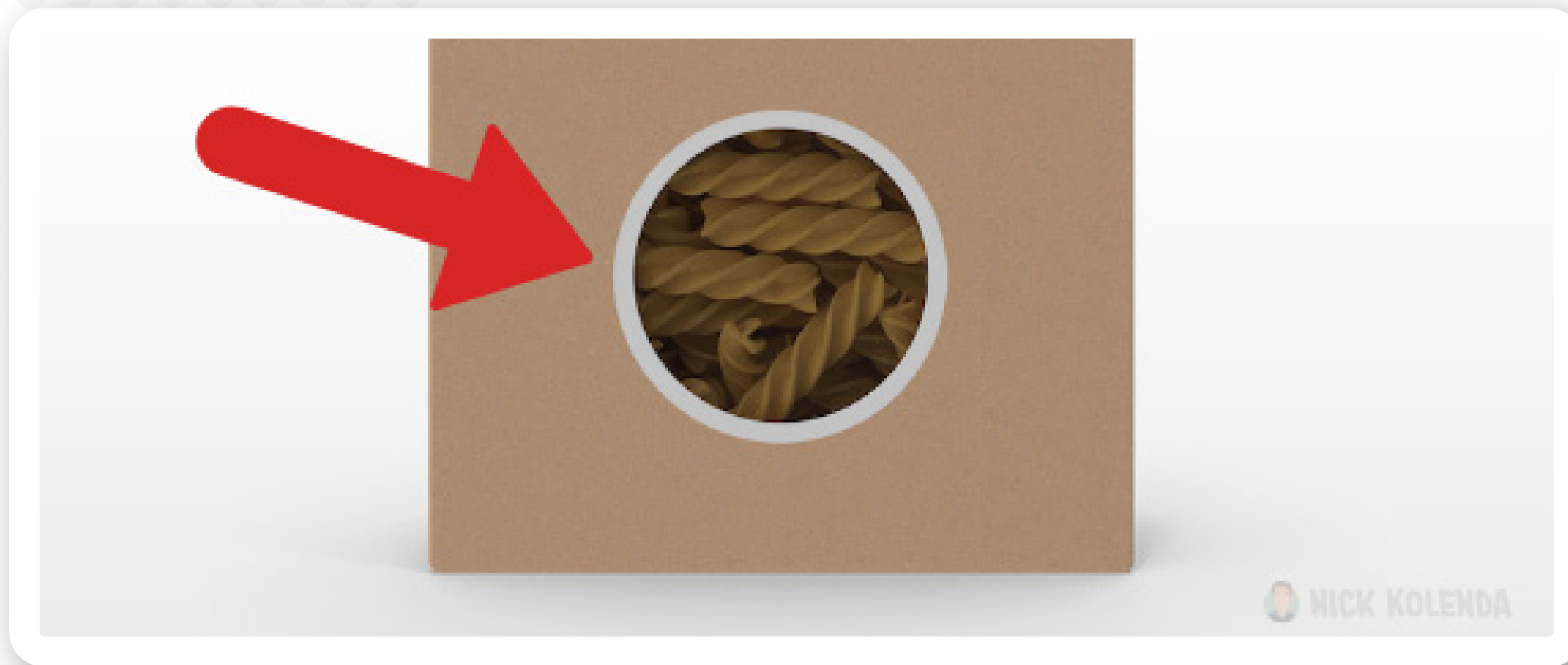
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Some brands insert a hole in their package for functional or aesthetic reasons.

But any missing section makes the package seem smaller and less desirable (Sevilla & Kahn, 2014).

Instead of using empty gaps as makeshift handles, consider adding a separate attachment.





## Transparent Windows Convey Freshness

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Customers prefer food packaging with transparent windows because the food seems fresher and higher quality:

“...the ability to see a food product directly through a transparent window would make it more salient in the mind of the consumer (compared to just a printed graphic of the product), thus eliciting greater levels of hunger and food cravings” (Simmonds, Woods, & Spence, 2018)

However, be careful with breakable products (e.g., chips). Allow transparency if you're confident that products will remain unbroken.



The background of the image is a blurred photograph of several plastic bottles and containers. In the foreground, a large, clear plastic bottle with a white screw cap is visible. To its right, a yellow plastic bottle with a red cap is partially seen. In the background, other bottles in various colors like pink, blue, and green are out of focus. The overall scene suggests a collection of plastic waste or products.

SIZE

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DESIGN





# Remove Packaging From Fresh Products

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Do you need packaging at all? Maybe not.

“...packaging acts as a symbolic barrier that separates the product from nature, decreasing perceived product naturalness and leading to less favorable product responses” (Szocs, Williamson, & Mills, 2022)

All else equal, an unbagged assortment of carrots will seem fresher than a bag of carrots – even if both carrots originate from the same source.

If freshness is important, remove your outside packaging.

But if you need packaging, emphasize a connection to nature:

- » **Sustainable Materials:** “Packaged in corn plastic.”
- » **Physical Connection:** “Plucked from the vineyard.”
- » **Psychological Connection:** “Packaged at the vineyard.”

Those statements offset the reduction in freshness.







## Matte Packages Seem Healthy

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Glossy packages are shiny, while matte packages are smooth and dull.

Oftentimes, glossy packages contain unhealthy snacks (e.g., chips), while matte packages contain healthier snacks (e.g., crackers). Based on these real-world exposures, customers believe that food in matte packages are healthier and more natural (Ye, Morrin, & Kampfer, 2020; Marckhgott, & Kamleitner, 2019).

Food in a glossy package seems fattier, perhaps because glossiness resembles greasiness (De Kerpel, Kobuszewski Volles, & Van Kerckhove, 2020).





## Rough Textures Seem Masculine

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In one study, participants preferred masculine scents on rough paper, yet feminine on smooth paper (Krishna, Elder, & Caldara, 2010).

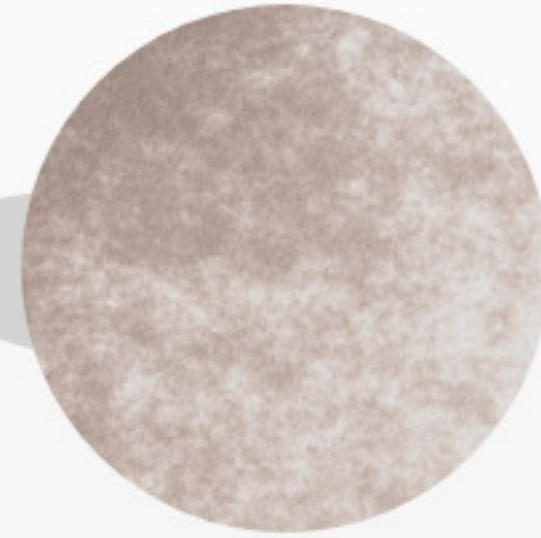
If your product is masculine, add rough textures across touchpoints (e.g., brand identity, packaging, product material).



# USE **ROUGH TEXTURE** FOR **MASCULINE PRODUCTS**

**LOGO**

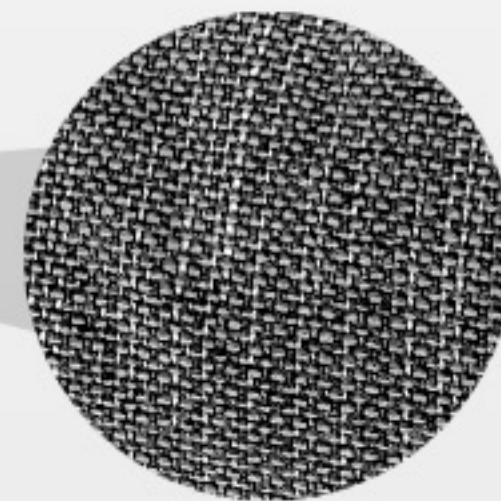
branding



packaging



material



Krishna, A., Elder, R. S., & Caldara, C. (2010). Feminine to smell but masculine to touch? Multisensory congruence and its effect on the aesthetic experience. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 20(4), 410-418.

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## Glass Seems Better Than Plastic

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Customers prefer products in glass (vs. plastic) packaging (Balzarotti, Maviglia, Biassoni, & Ciceri, 2015).

Perhaps you can measure the increase in preference (and whether it would offset the extra cost of glass).







SIZE

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## Unknown Brands Should Invest in Packaging

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Suppose that your new brand will compete with cheaper, well-known brands. Do you stand a chance?

Turns out, yes—if you develop the right packaging. Research confirms that customers will select a new (and more expensive brand) if the packaging is beautiful and attention-grabbing (Reimann et al., 2010).





## Show More Product Units on the Package

Research shows that customers equate the imagery on a package with the contents inside: More units on the outside? More units on the inside (Madzharov & Block, 2010).

However, be careful with organic products. Customers are drawn toward organic products with minimalist packaging because they believe it's more natural, as if this food is free from chemical preservatives (Margariti, 2021).





## Display Realistic Images for Emotional Products

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Some products evoke strong emotions (e.g., desserts).

In these contexts, realistic photographs are more persuasive because they depict the product experience more vividly (Ketron, Naletelich, & Migliorati, 2021).

Do the opposite for negative product experiences (e.g., vegetables, exercise). Use symbolic or digital images to obscure this potentially harmful mental imagery.





## Place Heavy Products in the Bottom or Right

Do your customers want a heavy product? Then place images in the bottom or right of the package (Deng & Kahn, 2009).

- » **Why Bottom?** Heavy objects sink to the bottom.
- » **Why Right?** Visual canvases are conceptualized like a teeter-totter. Objects on the right seem heavier because they “pull” downward (Arnheim, 1997).

Conversely, choose the left side for light products. Food seems healthier when it appears on the left, and these locations influence the flavor and amount eaten (Romero & Biswas, 2016; Togawa, Park, Ishii, & Deng, 2019).







## Choose Light and Natural Colors for Healthy Products

Dark colors seem heavy, while light colors seem...light. In other words, they seem easier to lift (Arnheim, 1997).



Customers attribute this heaviness to the product. Chocolate in dark packaging seems rich and filling, but chocolate in light packaging seems lighter and healthier.

Light colors seem natural, too:

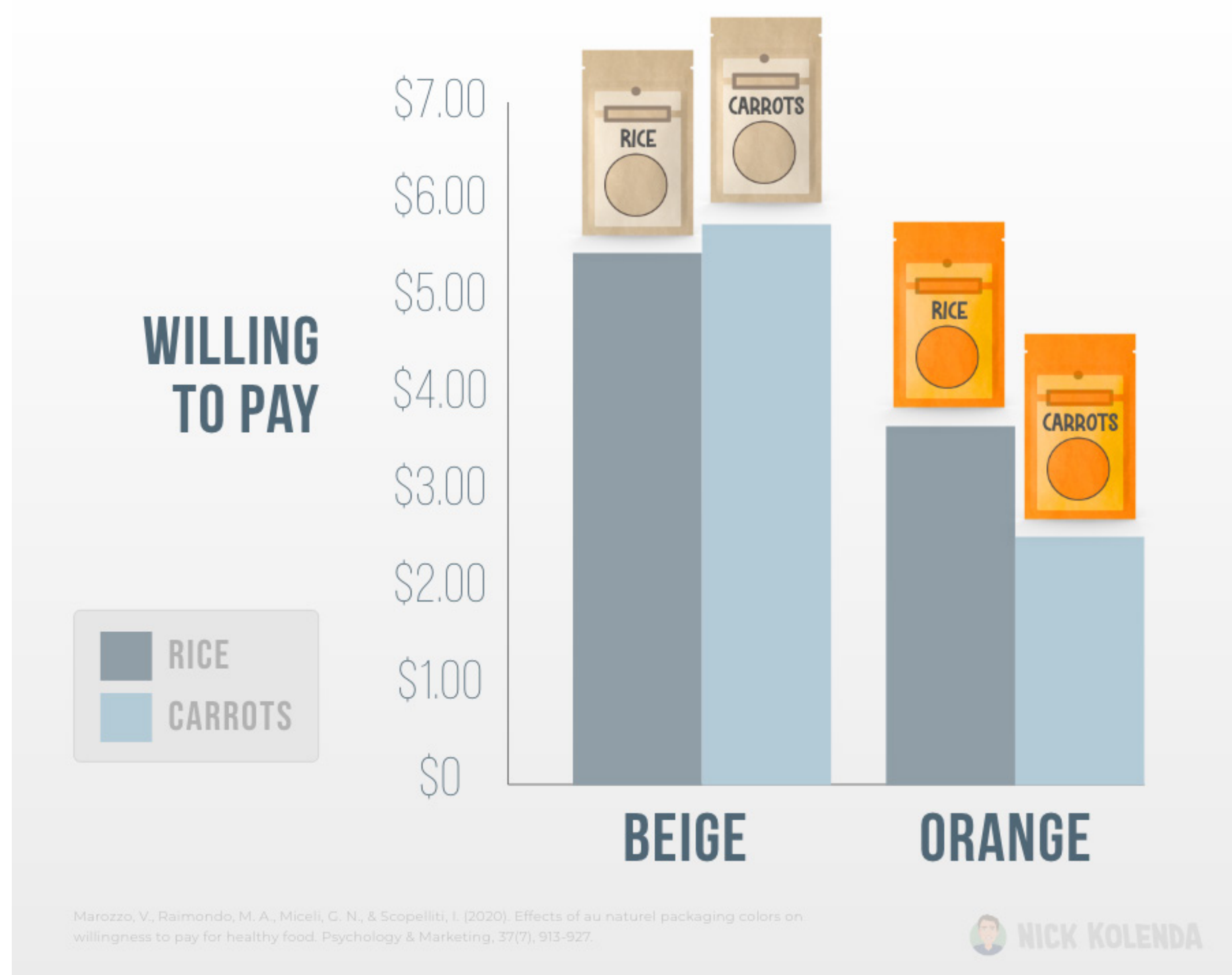
...*au naturel* colors are defined as undyed, non-artificial, untreated, and unprocessed colors,





that bring to mind something earthy, genuine, unadulterated, and expressing authenticity. Hues of beige (e.g., cream, sandy beiges, and mellow browns) belong to this color family (Marozzo, Raimondo, Miceli, & Scopelliti, 2020)

Customers prefer healthy food in natural packaging. Researchers compared beige and orange packaging for rice and carrots, and beige outperformed orange for both foods (including carrots that are typically orange; Marozzo, Raimondo, Miceli, & Scopelliti, 2020).



Indeed, food seems less healthy in brightly saturated packaging (Mead & Richerson, 2018). If you sell healthy food, choose a muted and natural color for your package.



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# NEXT STEP

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