# Stellenbosch 2023 Abstract Submission

**Title**  
Marketing Sustainable Agriculture as a Basis of Legitimacy in New York’s Hudson River Region Wine Industry

**I want to submit an abstract for:**  
Conference Presentation

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**Keywords**  
Sustainable Agriculture, Environmental Communication, Green Marketing, Institutional Theory, Basis of Legitimacy, Hudson River Region Wine

**Research Question**  
RQ1: In what ways do Hudson River Region wineries communicate information about sustainable agriculture through marketing on wine bottle labels?

**Methods**  
By means of content analysis, this research explores how sustainable agriculture practices at Hudson River Region wineries are communicated on wine bottle labels to increase Basis of Legitimacy.

**Results**  
Results are in process, taking place over one calendar year: data collection (summer 2023), data analysis (fall 2023), report of findings (spring 2024), and presentation of findings (summer 2024).

**Abstract**  
New York is the third top wine producing state in America with an annual net production of 12 million units and a total of 411 wineries, which account for 4% of the domestic wine industry yearly production and 4% of total number of United States wineries (Back, 2019; Wines Vines Analytics, 2020). Competitive wine production across the United States has challenged New York winemakers to secure a place in the domestic market in order to support the long-term viability of the local economy (Yue, 2019). As businesses of agriculture become increasingly disrupted by the changing natural environment and consumer demand for sustainable products grows, vintners may distinguish themselves through the production and promotion of strategic initiatives on wine bottle labels (Aka et al., 2018; Asimov, 2019b; Edick & Willcox, 2017; Peterson et al., 2019; Sweitzer-Lamme, 2019). Fueled by the distinct fields of green marketing and environmental communication, this research investigates the promotion of sustainable practices on wine bottle labels. Through the methodology of content analysis, this project examines wineries located in the Hudson River Region of New York to determine the extent to which sustainable agriculture marketing is used as a communication strategy.

This paper reveals the potential for the Hudson River Region wine industry to promote its “distinctive” and “innovative” environmental philosophy of “terroir driven and sustainably produced” winemaking on wine bottle labels to differentiate themselves in a crowded and expanding marketplace and build a Basis of Legitimacy with
consumers. This research carries practical, business, and social implications for the local Hudson River Region, the larger New York wine industry, and any organization looking to remain viable in a competitive marketplace.

Theoretical Framework
Institutional Theory
Institutional Theory examines ways in which organizational practices are connected to social relationships and the cultural environment (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2010). The theory provides the appropriate framing for this study because it explains how organizational messages are produced, managed and distributed with a focus on building institutional legitimacy (Selznick, 1957; Zucker, 1977). Originating from foundational research by Selznick (1948, 1949), the framework expanded in academic and industry circles from the 1950s through the 1980s (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977) and was further developed in the mid-1990s (Scott, 1995). Over the decades, Institutional Theory has remained a prominent perspective in contemporary corporate research and is “often used to explain the adoption and spread of formal organizational structures, including written policies, standard practices, and new forms of organization” (David et al., 2019).

With a focus on “the relationship between organizations and environments” (Cai & Mehari, 2015, p. 4), Institutional Theory argues that organizations are social organisms that collectively provide lenses through which individuals and groups interpret institutional behavior (Kilbourne & Carlson, 2008). The theory posits that social reality is a human construction determined through group interaction and identifies Institutionalism, the process by which actions are repeated and given meaning, as a core process in the creation and perpetuation of social behavior (Scott, 2008). According to Scott (1995), “Institutions operate at different levels of jurisdiction, from the world system to localized interpersonal relationships” (p. 33). This geographic principle provides a foundational justification for the use of Institutional Theory in this study of the New York wine industry and complements “the growing interest of scholars in exploring environmental relations as sources of organizations’ actions” (David et al., 2019).

Basis of Legitimacy
Institutional Theory states that organizational change is driven by symbolic actions and external influences (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). According to the theory, many organizational practices are an outcome of social rather than economic pressures. “That is, a central assumption of Institutional Theory is the idea that organizations improve their odds of survival by conforming to commonly held expectations of what a successful organization should appear to be. Organizations that appear to be legitimate are more likely to access resources” (Suddaby, 2013, p. 381); a conclusion reinforced by Nielsen and Thomsen (2015) who state “legitimacy is considered vital for the survival of organizations and a prerequisite for the flow of resources and stakeholder support” (p. 494).

Legitimacy can be defined as “a process whereby organizations seek approval for their acts from groups in society” (Kaplan & Ruland, 1991, p. 370). One strand of Institutional Theory, Basis of Legitimacy, predicts that organizational stability and industry survival are directly related to consumer perception of the institution, as illustrated through Scott’s (1995) Pillars of Institutions: Regulative, Normative, and Cognitive (see Table I).

In many cases, the Basis of Legitimacy results in organizational decisions to conform to socially acceptable, culturally supported norms, values, and beliefs (Suchman, 1995). “Institutional Theorists assert that the institutional environment can strongly influence the development of formal structures in an organization, often more profoundly than market pressures” (Rollag, 2020). In recent years, however, this thinking has rotated and Institutional Theory has become “more interested in understanding how organizations actively influence their institutional environment” (Suddaby, 2013, p. 383). One potential example of this influence may be found in the promotion of sustainable practices on bottle labels in the wine industry. According to Beverland & Luxton (2005), “this [sustainable] strategy is necessary for some brands facing large, entrenched, mass-market competitors to reinforce their image as responsible, moral advocates for the environment, thus gaining support for their agenda” (p. 104).

According to Boxenbaum (2020), “the relationships between individuals and institutions is a core feature of the foundations of Institutional Theory” (p. 299). Addressed from a legitimacy perspective, Nielsen and Thomsen (2018) found that for organizations the most important types of legitimizing communicative practices were related to
creating stakeholder value, collaboration, and engagement. “Appealing to stakeholder engagement and involvement is instrumental for gaining social capital and ... crucial for gaining corporate legitimacy” (p. 500). As bottle labels serve as the prime communication device for stakeholders in the wine industry, examining Hudson River Region wine labels through the framing of Institutional Theory allows for investigation of organizational actions to create a Basis of Legitimacy and supports the rationale for adoption as this study’s theoretical framework.

Research Questions
This exploratory research offers a comprehensive means to address the proposed research questions:

RQ1: In what ways do Hudson River Region wineries communicate information about sustainable agriculture through marketing on wine bottle labels?

RQ2: Does marketing sustainable agriculture on wine bottle labels increase Hudson River Region wineries’ Basis of Legitimacy?

N.B. I had submitted similar research for the Georgia conference, but I was unable to attend. I very much look forward to participating in Stellenbosch.

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