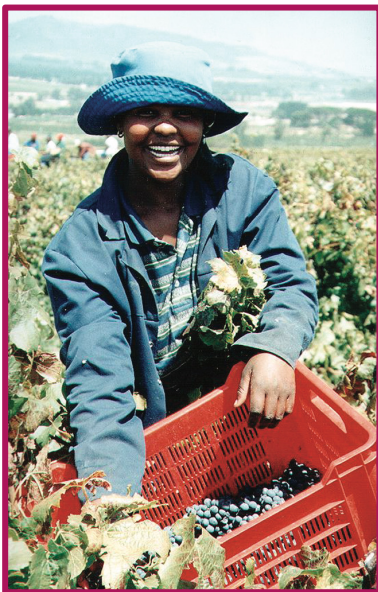


## Wine Farmworker Heritage Stories and the Potential for Ethical Value Generation



The study explored the potential for South African wine farmworkers to take on a more frontline role as co-creators of winery brand value.

### Project aims:

- Develop a multi-stakeholder perspective on South African wine farmworkers' heritage stories;
- Demonstrate the potential for farmworker heritage stories to generate value in a major export market (UK).

### Project design:

- Comparative analysis of marketing communications of South African, French, Italian and Australian wines;
- Interviews and focus groups representing four stakeholder groups—farmworkers, owners, retailers, consumers—involved in realizing South African wine brand value.

### Background:

In the crowded global wine market, ethical quality signals tend to focus on provenance, justice, and sustainability.<sup>1</sup> Evidence is mixed as to how effectively certifications can communicate such credence cues.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, research suggests that credible, authentic stories and self-declarations of provenance, family heritage and ethical practices can generate premium value for wines.<sup>3</sup> While provenance stories are central to premium wine differentiation, farmworkers are a largely absent and unacknowledged group of stakeholders—both as subjects of provenance stories and as storytellers. The pilot study focused on stories, not certifications, as vehicles for wine brand ethical value creation, and explored opportunities for farmworkers to be powerful frontline storytellers of evidence-led, credible, authentic provenance stories.

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**Project team:** Professor Jennifer Smith Maguire; Ms Nikita-Marie Bridgeman; Mr Charles Erasmus; Ms Sharron Marco-Thyse. **Project funding, assistance and contributions in kind from:** Sheffield Hallam University; UK & Ireland Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME); Wine Industry Value Chain Roundtable; Centre for Rural Legal Studies; Ms Vivian Kleynhans, Seven Sisters Winery. **Special thanks to the participants who shared their thoughts and time.** Full project report: <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/id/eprint/27922>

# Five perspectives on

**1. Wine Farmworkers:** We explored farmworkers' stories of growing up and working on wine farms in two storytelling workshops, which generated five overarching themes.

## Collective Heritage

Respondents collectively drew on 180-209 years of experience: a substantial resource for enhancing wine farm provenance stories.

*In the wine industry, when you grow up on a wine farm, there is always a story to tell. Always. So, it is never a dull moment. You never get bored of it.*

*I grew up from childhood with the vine plant. I was 9 years old when I started working in the vineyard.*

## Family Identity

Stories highlighted bonds between members of the farm community, and an inclusive sense of family.

*It is a family farm but not just about the [owners]. When newcomers arrive, they are accepted and become part of the family.*

*What is unique about [the farm] for me is the fact that we are all family irrespective of child or grandchild. When we walk out with the owner of the farm, we are one.*

*Our communication is so easy as if we are a family.*

## Nostalgia

Nostalgic reflections on childhood and life on the farm highlighted people, places, and rituals.

*I miss the work in the vineyard and the things you learn every day... I also miss the discussions with other people...*

*From my earliest memories I can remember oom \_\_. We as children always gathered at his place... I will never forget that small house.*

*The owner always gave us a lovely braai after harvest. On that day we party and dance and go on... It is those fun times together I remember.*

## Expertise and Pride

Stories of skills and a sense of identity: it's more than just a job.

*Our supervisor... showed me [how to prune] and it was a big learning experience... it became an enjoyable experience.*

*When we prune in the vineyard [they say about me]: 'You must cut correctly, [he] is on his way back.'*

*People [say] the wine maker is the best [but] it does not start there. It starts in the vineyard because if they don't prune right, you will not get a good wine.*

## The intrinsic value of telling and sharing heritage stories

*It was lovely remembering so many things of our past.*

*It was very useful sharing our memories with someone else.*

# farmworker heritage

**2. Marketing communications:** We analyzed how ethical value is communicated to wine consumers, comparing the relative prominence of framings of ethical value for South African, French, Italian and Australian winery websites (total, n=60). Findings included:

- Little emphasis on certifications: only 15% of the total sample made mention of certifications.
  - Provenance was the dominant framing of ethical value for all four countries, but more variation for South African wineries (e.g., use of justice as a dominant ethical value frame).
  - Family was the dominant framing of provenance for French, Italian and Australian wineries, whereas South African wineries were more varied (family, heritage and *terroir*).
  - Images of and references to farmworkers were a distinctive feature of South African wineries (40% of the South African sample), but scarce otherwise (only 10% of the remaining sample).
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**3. Winery owner:** An interview with a South African ‘first generation’ wine brand owner. As a single interview, the focus was not on generalizing, but on identifying potential points of connection between personal/family heritage and wine brand value.

- Family heritage places a relatively recent winery history into a much longer historical frame; it becomes ‘grafted’ on to a new place through time, practice, symbols and rituals.
  - *I’m a first-generation wine farmer and the significance...is that I can tell that story to my grandchildren. ... I think the things that happened to us made me more determined to have my own land, to have my own vineyards. ...We had a celebration when we harvested our first grapes!... You could not believe in how we carried on that day. It was a whole festive day. The families were in between the vines...it was a beautiful day.*
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**4. Wine merchant:** Expert intermediaries are influential in swaying high involvement consumers’ views of modestly priced wines.<sup>4</sup> We interviewed a UK independent wine merchant (for exploration, not generalization) as to the attributes they looked for in listing South African wineries, which included taste and price point as well as integrity and ethics:

- *That is really important to me, the mouth feel, the structure and then having got that far, okay, let’s learn a bit more about it... If I can find something... that’s got a bit of style, a bit of individuality... I’m now also very strong on how they run the business. The whole ethics of it all, as well as the way they make their wines, their viniculture and their viticulture and so forth... the sort of people they are, their honesty, their discretion...when a wine has soul you normally find that the people who are doing it are much the same.*
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**5. Wine consumers:** Interviews with six high involvement UK wine consumers (of whom: three had been to SA for wine tourism; all drink SA wine at least six times a year) explored perceptions of South African wines, and of farmworker heritage stories.

- South African wine was commonly associated with ‘good quality’ and ‘value for money.’
- Responses to winery ethical value propositions varied, from scepticism (‘marketing waffle’) to positive associations with quality (‘if they care about their employees, they care about the wine they produce and their customers... I just felt it was honest and suggested integrity’)
- Responding to a mock provenance story based on the storytelling workshop data, one said:
- *The wine tells the workers’ stories, which I think points out how it’s not just the world-famous wine maker...but a lot of people involved in growing the grapes, then producing the wine, and the wine in the bottle is the culmination of the work and tells their story.*

Farmworkers are often focal subjects in justice-oriented certifications such as Fairtrade, but they are noticeably absent as the subject of, and storytellers for wine stories. This absence is striking given the overwhelming attention in the premium wine market to quality claims made through provenance stories that highlight 'wines with a face,' hand crafted-ness, and heritage.

Looking across the five perspectives, the pilot study suggests several **routes to ethical value creation** involving wine farmworkers as frontline storytellers of evidence-led, credible provenance stories. These routes include stories that spotlight:

- **Family** (e.g., the positive connotations of the farm family as a supportive, safe, welcoming community);
- **Heritage** (e.g., intangible cultural heritage of pruning expertise, learned through the passing on of skills; personal heritage and nostalgia);
- **Authenticity** (e.g., evidenced through stories of growing up on the farm; distance from the forms of marketing that attract scepticism);
- **Tangibility and credibility** (e.g., concrete, material labour, places, people);
- **Justice** (e.g., evidencing employer integrity and positive social upliftment);
- **Sustainability** (e.g., frontline farm work involved in protecting biodiversity through hand-picking or hand-tilling);
- **Provenance** (e.g., biographical specificity of vineyard production; physical and symbolic proximity of farm work to the soil and terroir).

The focus of the pilot was on value creation for the wine brand in an export (UK) market. At the same time, however, the storytelling workshop respondents' comments suggest the potential to generate other forms of ethical value, such as affirming community, individual identity and pride, and social cohesion.

**Feedback or questions? Please get in touch : Jennifer Smith Maguire [j.smith1@shu.ac.uk](mailto:j.smith1@shu.ac.uk)**

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## Endnotes:

1. Overton, Murray & Howson 2019.
2. E.g., Annunziata, Ianuario & Pascale 2011; Capitello & Sirieix 2019; Rojas-Méndez, Le Nestour & Rod 2015; Flores 2018; Forbes et al. 2009; Schäufole & Hamm 2017.
3. Downing & Parrish 2019; Fanasch & Frick 2020; Smith Maguire 2018; Warman & Lewis 2019.
4. Aqueveque 2015.

Full citations provided in the pilot project report: <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/id/eprint/27922>

Image credit: Hendrik Holler (Wines of South Africa, <https://www.wosa.co.za/Multimedia/Photo-Library/Landing-Page/>)