

Global Diffusion of Agricultural Youth Organization: Strategic Communication and Institutional Partnership in FFA and 4-H International Adoption (1920s-1970s)

Adebayo Adeoti

Texas Tech University

Department of Agricultural Education & Communications

Box 42132, Lubbock, TX 79409-2131

aadeoti@ttu.edu

Dr. Lacey Roberts-Hill

Texas Tech University

Department of Agricultural Education & Communications

Box 42132, Lubbock, TX 79409-2131

lacey.roberts-hill@ttu.edu

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Introduction/Need for Research

Future Farmers of America (FFA) and 4-H programs are among the most influential youth development organizations in the United States (Borden et al., 2014; Connors, 2013). These programs not only have millions of U.S. youths participating (Borden et al., 2014), they have also spread across different countries (Connors, 2013). These organizations have improved agricultural literacy, leadership skills, and community engagement among young people worldwide (Connors, 2013). The international expansion represents a notable case of diffusion of educational innovations in agricultural development (Connors, 2013; National 4-H History Preservation Program, n.d.). While evidence exists to support the global impact of these programs, little research has explored the communication strategies utilized to achieve this global adoption. Recent studies have explored how digital technologies are improving agricultural communication, agricultural programs and extension (Khan et al., 2024). However, very little is known regarding the historical foundations of how agricultural programs spread globally. The international spread of FFA and 4-H during the 1920s–1970s occurred in a period when communication technologies were not so developed, yet these programs achieved remarkable adoption across multiple continents. Understanding how this historical diffusion occurred would provide insights into the foundational communication practices that enabled agricultural education programs to spread globally. Examining these historical practices also informs contemporary agricultural education, Extension, and international youth-development efforts seeking to scale culturally responsive programs through effective communication and trusted partnerships.

The purpose of this historical study was to document the international diffusion of FFA and 4-H and to assess the communication strategies that promoted their widespread acceptance.

Theoretical Framework

This research was guided by the Diffusion of Innovations theory by Rogers (2003), which highlighted four essential elements that are important when analyzing the spread of an innovation. FFA and 4-H programs represent the innovation. Communication channels were mass media and interpersonal channels which were more effective at influencing people's to adopt the innovation. Time focused on the rate at which the innovation was accepted across different continents. Lastly, there were social systems which represented the institutional, cultural and political settings that influenced acceptance of the innovation. This study focused on the communication channels and social systems that FFA and 4-H utilized to achieve international adoption.

Methodology

An historical research approach was used to examine the communication strategies and organizational structure that influenced the international diffusion of FFA and 4-H from 1920-1970 because that period represented the early stages of international spread. Primary historical accounts and organizational records (e.g., Agricultural Education Magazine articles and 4-H program histories) and secondary scholarly sources on FFA, 4-H and international exchange made up the purposive document corpus. Data consisted of primary and secondary sources related to FFA and 4-H international activities and agricultural youth exchange. Only sources that contained evidence of communication strategies and institutional partnerships were included while those that did not show any specific international exchange activity were excluded. 11 sources that met the criteria

were selected and evaluated for authenticity and credibility using external and internal criticism (McDowell, 2002). Documents were deductively coded using Rogers' (2003) framework, which focused on communication channels and social systems such as interpersonal exchange, study tours, government involvement, and organizational support. The coded evidence were synthesized and reported using historical narrative format (Schutt, 2001).

Findings

Two complementary approaches facilitated the international diffusion of FFA and 4-H during the 1920s–1970s: interpersonal communication through exchange programs and study tours, while institutional partnerships with government ministries provided legitimacy and structural support for adoption. In 1948, the 4-H International Farm Youth Exchange (IFYE) sent 17 American delegates to seven European countries while hosting six Europeans in the United States (National 4-H History Preservation Program, n.d.). Around that time international study tours were organized also by FFA, which served as the main communication channels to develop cross-cultural understanding (Pace, 1998). These programs relied on interpersonal communication channels such as living with farm host families, farm visits, and study tours which required agricultural professionals and young ambassadors to travel and share their knowledge and experiences with other countries through face-to-face interactions that helped establish relationships with foreign government officials and educators (Allen, 1939; Dickinson, 1947). United States Department of Agriculture officials advised the leaders of foreign governments and provided educational materials (National 4-H History Preservation Program, n.d.). Former national FFA president and a former vocational agriculture teacher serving with the Army of Occupation in Japan were similarly involved in direct advisory work to international agricultural education institutions through FFA (Connors, 2013).

This interpersonal communication strategy grew with the help of complementary programs such as the Professional Rural Youth Leader Exchange (1962), Youth Development Program (1967), and exchanges with Japan (1972) and the Soviet Union (1976) (National 4-H History Preservation Program, n.d.). FFA and 4-H also strategically partnered with government institutions of other countries to establish programs aligned with a country's local needs. After World War II, FFA worked with the U.S. government to establish agricultural youth organizations in Japan (1950) and Greece (1935) (Connors, 2013). Peace Corps agreement with National 4-H Foundation (1961-1971) extended partnerships to Brazil, El Salvador, Uruguay, Venezuela, and Malaysia (National 4-H History Preservation Program, n.d.). These partnerships operated through formal or institutional communication channels where the government served as a communication system ensuring credibility and fostering adaptation to the cultural context of the country (Connors, 2013).

Conclusions and Recommendations

The international diffusion of FFA and 4-H from 1920 to 1970 was facilitated by the combined use of interpersonal communication and institutional partnerships. Exchanges, host-family experiences, farm visits, and study tours built trust and cross-cultural understanding, while government ministries and formal organizations provided legitimacy, resources, and platforms for local adaptation. In order to create a scalable youth program, it is important for agricultural educators and Extension professionals to combine relationship-based learning experiences with partnerships involving locally trusted institutions. Future research should examine how Interpersonal communication strategies and local institutional partnerships support the adaptation of agricultural youth programs in different international contexts.

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