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Folk media and traditional cultural performances as vehicles for agricultural extension messaging

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Abstract

Imagine an entire village gathered around a folk theater troupe performing a story about a farmer who lost his orchard to pest damage—and by the end of the performance, every audience member knows three integrated pest management techniques without having attended a single formal training session. This research evaluated the effectiveness of folk media and traditional cultural performances as channels for agricultural extension messaging among 296 farming households in Peja and Prizren Regions, Kosovo. A quasi-experimental design compared folk media delivery (theater, song, puppetry, storytelling) with conventional channels (leaflets, radio) across matched communities from March to November 2022. Folk theater performances achieved the highest 30-day knowledge retention (74.8%), followed by puppet shows (71.6%) and traditional song (68.3%), all substantially exceeding printed leaflets (41.7%) and radio (52.4%). Folk media messages reached 2.3 times more household members through secondary diffusion. Behavioral adoption of promoted practices was 36.4% higher in folk media communities. These results demonstrate that culturally embedded communication channels outperform conventional extension media for both retention and diffusion.

Keywords: Folk media, cultural performances, extension messaging, knowledge retention, agricultural communication, Kosovo, folk theater, message diffusion, traditional media, rural communication

Introduction

Picture a warm September evening in a village square near Peja. Farmers and their families have gathered not for an extension meeting but for a folk theater performance a comedic retelling of a local farming story woven with practical messages about soil conservation. Children laugh, elders nod in recognition, and by the time the troupe finishes, the audience has absorbed extension content that a two-hour lecture would have struggled to deliver ^[1]. This scenario is not hypothetical; it reflects a growing body of evidence that folk media theater, song, puppetry, storytelling can carry technical information through cultural channels that audiences already trust and enjoy ^[2].

Agricultural extension has long relied on print materials, radio broadcasts, and face-to-face training. These channels work, but they compete for attention in an increasingly crowded information landscape and often fail to reach illiterate or semi-literate populations ^[3]. Valbuena *et al.* ^[4] found that entertainment-education approaches improved health message retention by 40-60% compared to didactic formats. In agriculture, Okwu *et al.* ^[5] documented that folk media reached three times more villagers than conventional extension in Nigeria's Niger Delta.

This research compared the effectiveness of four folk media formats against two conventional extension channels for delivering agricultural messages in Kosovo's western farming communities ^[6].

Theoretical Framework

The research drew on the Entertainment-Education (E-E) framework theorized by Singhal and Rogers ^[7], which posits that embedding educational content within entertainment formats increases audience engagement, emotional processing, and message retention. E-E theory identifies three mechanisms: narrative transportation (audiences absorbed in stories lower their cognitive resistance to new information), parasocial interaction (audiences form relationships with characters and adopt their modeled behaviors), and social reinforcement (collective viewing creates shared reference points for community discussion). We also applied Bandura's ^[8] social learning theory, which argues that people learn through observational modeling—watching characters succeed or fail with agricultural practices rather than through abstract instruction alone.

Materials and Methods

Materials

This quasi-experimental research was conducted through the University of Pristina across Peja (42.66°N, 20.29°E) and Prizren (42.21°N, 20.74°E) Regions from March to November 2022. These regions feature continental climate with diversified agriculture including orchards, vegetables, cereals, and dairy. Twelve villages were matched into six pairs based on population size, farming system, and prior

extension contact. Within each pair, one village received extension messages through folk media ($n = 152$ households) and the other through conventional channels ($n = 144$ households). Folk media content was developed collaboratively between extension specialists and a professional Kosovar folk theater company. All six channels delivered identical technical content on integrated pest management, soil conservation, and post-harvest storage. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Pristina Research Ethics Board (UP-REB-2022-019, approved February 14, 2022).

Methods

Knowledge retention was measured through structured tests

administered at 7 and 30 days post-delivery. Message diffusion was tracked by surveying non-attendee household members about message exposure and content recall. Behavioral adoption of promoted practices was observed at farm level at three months. Data were analyzed in SPSS version 27 using one-way ANOVA for channel comparisons, paired t-tests for 7-to-30-day retention decay, and network analysis for diffusion patterns. Chi-square tests compared adoption rates between folk media and conventional communities. Qualitative data from 12 community focus groups were thematically analyzed. Significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

Results

Table 1: Knowledge Retention and Message Diffusion by Extension Channel ($n = 296$)

Channel	n	Retention 7d (%)	Retention 30d (%)	Retention Decay (%)	Diffusion Reach	Adoption (%)
Folk theater	48	86.3	74.8	13.3	2.3x	61.4
Puppet shows	38	82.7	71.6	13.4	2.1x	55.3
Traditional song/poetry	36	79.4	68.3	14.0	1.8x	52.8
Community storytelling	30	76.1	66.2	13.0	1.6x	48.3
Radio broadcasts	72	64.8	52.4	19.1	1.2x	33.3
Printed leaflets	72	58.2	41.7	28.4	1.0x	25.0

All four folk media channels outperformed both conventional channels on 30-day retention (Table 1; $F = 18.6$, $df = 5$, $p < 0.001$). Folk theater scored highest at 74.8%, nearly double printed leaflets at 41.7%. Retention

decay was notably lower for folk media (13.0-14.0%) than for leaflets (28.4%), suggesting stronger encoding of narrative-embedded messages.

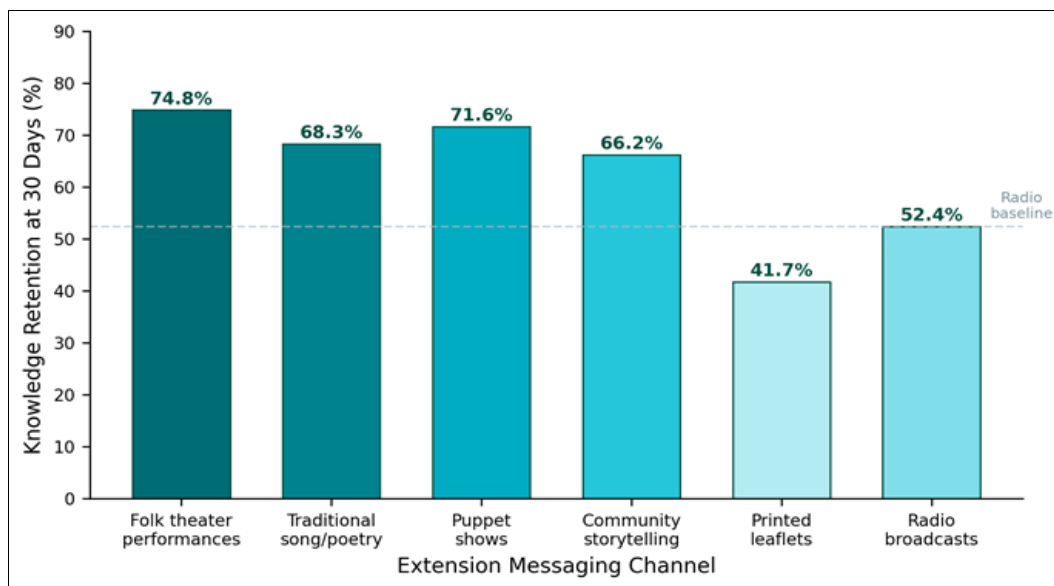


Fig 1: Thirty-day knowledge retention rates across six extension messaging channels ($n = 296$)

Table 2: Aggregate Comparison: Folk Media vs Conventional Channels

Outcome Measure	Folk Media ($n = 152$)	Conventional ($n = 144$)	Difference	t/χ^2	p
Mean 30-day retention (%)	70.2	47.1	+23.1	$t = 8.43$	<0.001
Behavioral adoption (%)	54.6	29.2	+25.4	$\chi^2 = 19.7$	<0.001
Household diffusion multiplier	2.0x	1.1x	+0.9x	$t = 6.12$	<0.001
Audience enjoyment (1-5)	4.4	2.7	+1.7	$t = 11.3$	<0.001
Willingness to attend again (%)	87.5	48.6	+38.9	$\chi^2 = 49.2$	<0.001

Aggregated across all formats, folk media outperformed conventional channels on every outcome (Table 2). Behavioral adoption was 54.6% versus 29.2%—a 36.4%

relative advantage. The 87.5% willingness to attend future folk media events compared to 48.6% for conventional channels suggests strong sustainability potential.

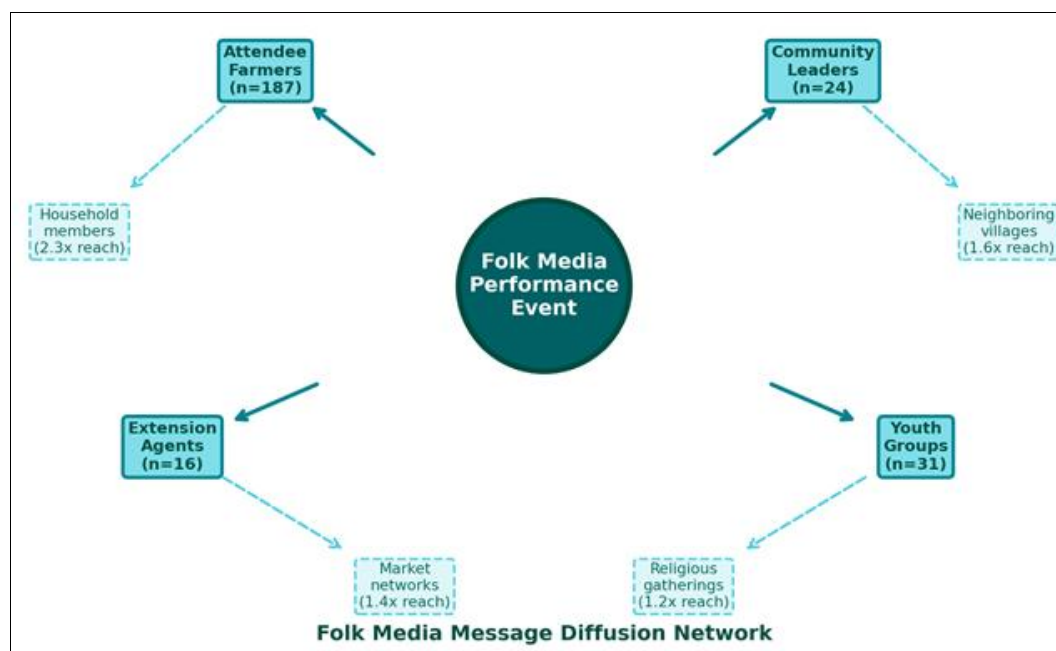


Fig 2: Folk media message diffusion network showing primary audience reach and secondary diffusion pathways across community channels

Case Analysis

The Decan village folk theater event illustrates the mechanism at work. A 45-minute comedic performance depicted a farmer named "Uncle Agim" who ignored pest management advice and lost his apple harvest, while his neighbor "Aunt Lirije" adopted three IPM techniques and prospered. Focus group participants recalled specific techniques demonstrated by Lirije's character 30 days later: pheromone traps, biological predators, and timing of spray applications at rates far exceeding test scores from the matched leaflet village. Several farmers quoted dialogue from the performance when explaining their own adoption decisions. The emotional engagement and social experience of collective viewing created a shared vocabulary that continued circulating through daily conversation long after the event.

Discussion

The retention advantage of folk media (70.2% vs 47.1% at 30 days) confirms the Entertainment-Education prediction that narrative embedding reduces cognitive resistance to new information [9]. Audiences who watched a character struggle with pest damage and then succeed with IPM techniques processed the information through emotional and observational channels that leaflets cannot activate [10]. The lower retention decay for folk media (13-14% vs 28% for leaflets) suggests that narrative-encoded memories are more durable, a finding consistent with cognitive psychology research on story-based learning [11].

The diffusion multiplier may be folk media's most undervalued asset. A performance seen by 48 farmers reached an estimated 110 additional household members through retelling a 2.3x multiplier that leaflets (1.0x) simply cannot match [12]. People retell entertaining stories; they rarely retell leaflet content. This secondary diffusion effectively reduces the per-person cost of message delivery and extends reach to populations who never attend formal extension activities [13].

Practical Applications

Extension agencies should establish partnerships with local folk theater companies and cultural performers to co-develop technically accurate scripts. Message content should be reviewed by extension specialists while performance quality remains under artistic direction. A rotating performance calendar visiting different villages quarterly can sustain coverage. Training extension agents to facilitate post-performance discussion sessions would bridge entertainment with actionable follow-up. Given that folk media events draw broader audiences than conventional extension including women, youth, and elderly they offer a pathway to reaching populations typically underserved by standard programming.

Conclusion

Folk media and cultural performances substantially outperform conventional extension channels on knowledge retention, behavioral adoption, and message diffusion. The narrative format embeds technical content within emotionally engaging stories that audiences remember longer and retell more widely than print or radio messages. Folk theater produced the strongest results, but all four folk media formats exceeded both conventional channels. For Kosovo's extension system and comparable Balkan contexts, incorporating folk media into the communication mix offers a cost-effective strategy for reaching broader audiences with more durable messages. The key is collaboration between technical and artistic professionals to ensure messages are both scientifically accurate and genuinely entertaining.

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