

**Alternative Media Production Within Qatar's Sportocracy:
The *Afour Podcast* Case-Study Analysis**

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Section 1: Introduction

When Abdulla Al-Nasr told us the exact feeling he felt being a twenty-year-old student sitting in the London embassy with a self-written proposal he wrote on a two-hour train ride and a half-million-riyal budget entrusted to him for a sports event by the Qatari Ambassador himself, he was not simply telling a personal story. He was describing a moment that captures the spirit of *Afour*: youth taking initiative in a media and sports environment where authority, funding, and public voice are usually centralized. Qatar's media landscape has grown increasingly professionalized, and state aligned, especially in sports, where major institutions and broadcasters shape most public narratives. In this context, grassroots platforms like Afour offer something rare. They create space for local voices, everyday athletes, and community stories that rarely appear in mainstream sports media.

This topic is meaningful to us as researchers and as members of Qatar's athletic community. Our own experiences as female athletes have shown us how limited public sports discourse can be, especially when it comes to highlighting personal journeys, smaller communities, or amateur participation. Afour felt different from the beginning. Before we chose it as a case study, we had already encountered it organically in the conversations, WhatsApp groups, and training facilities we participated in. It circulated not because it was promoted by institutions, but because people felt represented by it. That relevance, paired with the contrast between Afour's informal, conversational tone and the polished state-centered voice of mainstream sports media, made it a strong candidate for studying alternative media in Qatar.

To understand Afour more deeply, we conducted semi-structured interviews with its founder, Abdulla, and its co-founder and co-host, Cameron Bain. These interviews offered insight into how Afour emerged from student-led community events in the UK, how it grew into a podcast and event platform in Doha, and how its ethos is shaped by inclusivity, accessibility, and long-form conversation. These primary sources were paired with academic literature on alternative media to analyze Afour within broader theoretical frameworks.

This paper proceeds in three parts. First, it outlines four major conceptual approaches to alternative media as described by Bailey et al. (2008). Second, it provides background on Afour's development, structure, and purpose within Qatar's shifting media and sports landscape. Third, it analyzes Afour using themes such as decentralized voice, community participation, and its navigation of professionalization. The conclusion summarizes key insights, discusses limitations, and suggests directions for future research.

Section 2: Theoretical Approaches to Studying Alternative Media:

Alternative media can be understood through four key approaches presented by Bailey et al. (2008). These approaches clarify the different functions alternative media can perform, the communities they serve, and the organizational structures they adopt. Looking across the assigned course readings, each approach appears in varied cultural, political, and regional contexts, offering a foundation for analyzing Afour within Qatar's sports-media environment.

One approach understands alternative media as serving a community. This focuses on media created for and by specific groups whose needs or identities are underserved by mainstream outlets. Carter's (2001) study of Moroccan Berber video films illustrates how communities use accessible technologies to affirm cultural belonging when official media

marginalize their language and traditions. Hassanpour (1996) similarly describes Kurdish media as a cultural lifeline that preserves identity despite political suppression. In Lebanon, Maasri's (2009) work on civil-war posters shows how visual communication addressed highly localized audiences through symbols and messages rooted in shared experience. Across these cases, alternative media respond to community desires for representation and recognition. This framework is useful for Afour, which centers Qatar's everyday athletes and community sports participants who rarely appear in formal sports broadcasting.

A second approach defines alternative media as alternatives to the mainstream. Bailey et al. (2008) emphasize how such media resist dominant narratives, institutional control, or commercial pressures. Many course readings illustrate this oppositional relationship. Fanon's account of Radio Algeria (1967) shows how broadcasting became a revolutionary tool that countered colonial messaging through direct communication with the public. Limor's (2011) analysis of Israeli pirate radio demonstrates how unlicensed stations provide space for expression that state-regulated frequencies restrict. Kabha (2011) describes the Palestinian interwar press as a form of political resistance that documented events ignored or censored by colonial authorities. Naficy (1998) shows how Iranian exile music videos challenged culturally restrictive state frameworks. These examples highlight alternative media as sites of counter-narration and narrative autonomy. Afour is shaped by a softer version of this model, developing a conversational, unscripted sports discourse that departs from Qatar's institutionally curated sports narratives.

A third approach positions alternative media as part of civil society. This perspective highlights how media platforms enable public dialogue, political participation, and shared knowledge production. Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi's (1994) work on small media

during the Iranian Revolution shows how pamphlets, tapes, and sermons linked communities and circulated political ideas. Najjar (2014) describes AmmanNet as a digital space where citizens can engage issues mainstream media avoid. Aydin and Cyhan (2011) document how community media helped Ankara's trash sorters organize and resist stigma, while Kuttub (1993) shows how Palestinian video activism facilitated public witnessing and accountability. Fahmi's (2009) analysis of Cairo's bloggers emphasizes how digital spaces supported new forms of civic participation. In this sense, alternative media build environments where conversations otherwise absent from official public spheres can take place. Afour does this by fostering long-form, personal conversations about sports, health, and everyday life that rarely appear in Qatar's mainstream sports media.

The fourth approach is the rhizomatic model. Bailey et al. (2008) use the rhizome to describe media networks that develop horizontally rather than hierarchically. Rhizomatic media are adaptive, decentralized, and capable of growing through new connections instead of formal institutional expansion. Grondahl's (2009) work on Gaza graffiti demonstrates how messages emerge across different walls, neighborhoods, and platforms without a coordinating center. LeVine (2015) shows how artistic activism after the Arab uprisings spread through flexible networks of musicians, designers, and online communities. Fahmi's bloggers also illustrate this logic through informal linkages between online expression and street activism. These examples reveal alternative media as fluid and evolving, shaped by relationships rather than formal structures. Afour reflects this model through its growth from student events to a podcast, to a hybrid media-events platform supported by shifting collaborations and community ties. Across these four approaches, alternative media emerge not as a single category but as overlapping practices that represent communities, challenge established narratives, strengthen

civil society, and grow through flexible organizational forms. These frameworks offer a foundation for analyzing Afour's development and its role within Qatar's unique sports-media landscape.

Section 3: The Afour Podcast – Origins, Structure, and Qatar's Sports Media Context

Afour is a bilingual sports podcast and digital media project based in Doha that has developed into a recognizable grassroots platform within Qatar's athletic community. It operates across YouTube, Spotify, and Instagram, combining long-form conversations with short-form videos and on-site event coverage. Its tone is deliberately informal, emphasizing honesty, spontaneity, and personal storytelling rather than polished commentary. This style distinguishes Afour from Qatar's formal sports media, which is typically structured, institutionally produced, and oriented toward elite athletic performance or national achievements.

The project's origins trace back to Abdulla Al-Nasr's years as a student at the University of Liverpool. While serving on the Qatari Student Society's leadership team, Abdulla organized community-building sports events for Qatari students living abroad. These events became pivotal in shaping Afour's ethos. Abdulla frequently described how the supportive environment of beginner-friendly competitions helped him and others discover confidence, discipline, and belonging. When he and Cameron later reflected on these experiences, they realized that the community energy surrounding those events was itself a form of media production: it brought people together, circulated stories, and created shared meaning.

After returning to Doha, Abdulla and Cameron formalized the project. They established a dedicated studio, invested in audio-visual equipment, and built a small production team that now supports the podcast's filming and editing processes. Their professionalization was gradual but intentional, driven more by community interest than external pressures. Afour expanded beyond

talk episodes to event coverage, partnering with running events such as No Limits Qatar and serving as an alternative media outlet for the Samla race. These collaborations blend digital and physical engagement, allowing Afour to function as both a media platform and a community presence.

Afour's guest philosophy reflects its commitment to openness. Guests include professional athletes, amateur runners, coaches, expatriates, and "regular" Qataris whose stories might otherwise remain undocumented. Cameron noted that despite the growing visibility of Afour, their strongest episodes often come from everyday community members sharing personal journeys. At the same time, the team navigates the limitations imposed by Qatar's tightly regulated media environment, where government employees, professional athletes, and certain public figures face restrictions on appearing in non-institutional media.

Today, Afour operates as a hybrid space: part podcast, part events company, part community hub, part alternative media production for mainstream events. Its evolution shows how alternative media can emerge from grassroots social practices and adapt to a transforming national media landscape.

Section 4: Analysis

1. "Abdulla as Afour and Afour as Abdulla:" Afour's Strategic Decentralization toward an Inter-Networked Community Media Project

In its earliest stage, Afour functioned almost entirely as an extension of Abdulla himself. The brand emerged during his university years, when he organized the first Afour powerlifting competition with almost no team and full responsibility for planning, logistics, and storytelling. Abdulla described how he "did everything solo," from securing funding to developing the entire event blueprint on a train ride to London. Cam's interview confirms this origin story and notes

that at the beginning there was no team structure. This phase positioned Abdulla as the single root of the project, with Afour circulating through his labor, networks, and public presence.

As Afour expanded, Abdulla became increasingly concerned that the project would be reduced to personal branding rather than becoming a sustainable community platform. He explains that audiences began to associate Afour entirely with him, something he described as a diversion from the project's real purpose. He insisted that people should see Afour "as an entity, not as Abdulla as a person." This marked the beginning of Afour's shift toward decentralization. Instead of strengthening a personality-centered model, Abdulla worked to distribute visibility, authorship, and participation across a broader group.

This shift reflects a rhizomatic style of media making. Growth happens through new connections rather than a strict hierarchy. Abdulla encourages this by featuring amateur athletes, gym goers, race volunteers, and ordinary community members not only on the podcast but by going to those training spaces and events themselves. This is exemplified in episodes like their feature on a first-time marathon runner, shifting the narrative from elite performance to personal journey. He frames this as a democratic right, arguing "these individuals deserve platforms that are usually reserved for professionals." In this sense, Afour becomes a participatory media project that gives access to people who do not appear in mainstream sports coverage. Abdulla often says that Afour is "an outlet for anyone who needs it," which shows a commitment to democratic participation.

As Afour expanded, Abdulla became increasingly concerned that the project would be reduced to personal branding rather than becoming a sustainable community platform. He explains that audiences, particularly within the Arabic-speaking community where he was the sole recurring host, began to associate Afour entirely with him—a phenomenon wherein his

project began to diverge from its initial purpose. He insisted that people should see Afour “as an entity, not as Abdulla as a person.” This marked the beginning of a conscious shift toward decentralization, where growth would be measured not by the prominence of a single face, but by the distribution of voice and authorship. What might externally appear as mere professionalization—The recent formal introduction of recurring host Khalid Al-Obaidli in November of 2025, promoted on their Instagram as 'more voices, more stories,' serves as a direct intervention and is fundamentally a decentralization tactic. It is a direct intervention to counteract the personality-centric narrative and to build a multi-nodal Arabic-language presence that embodies Afour as a community entity.

The network thus expands horizontally in two reinforcing ways: through content and through production. Athletes become podcast guests, guests participate in Afour events, and viewers shape future content through submitted questions, creating a participatory cycle. Simultaneously, introducing new presenters and collaborators distributes authorship and ensures the project does not depend solely on Abdulla’s visibility. By intentionally widening the circle of voices and sharing control over the narrative, Afour has evolved from one individual’s initiative into an inter-networked media space designed in such a way where anyone can participate in both its development and circulation – defined not by its founder but by the community that contributes to it.

2. Civic and Community Function: Afour Targeting the Grassroots of Sportocracy Neglected by Mainstream Media

Qatar’s global sports strategy is bold, ambitious, and unprecedented for a country of its size. The state has invested billions into world-class stadiums, training facilities, academies, and hosting rights for international competitions. Mainstream media naturally echoes this narrative:

broadcasting elite matches, promoting national sporting achievements, and highlighting the country's growing prestige on the world stage. Yet, as Abdulla noted, this visibility obscures a critical paradox within Qatari society. Despite being one of the most sports-forward nations in terms of infrastructure and international exposure, Qatar still suffers from high rates of obesity, diabetes, and physical inactivity, particularly among young Qataris (Abu-Raddad, 2023). The symbolic power of elite sports has not translated into widespread grassroots participation.

This is precisely where Afour positions itself. As a form of alternative media, Afour does not replicate mainstream narratives that celebrate elite performance or national spectacle. Instead, it works to cultivate a *sports culture at the level of everyday life*. The podcast centers stories, experiences, and discussions that resonate with the average Qatari who is not part of professional sports networks. Through open, organic conversations, Afour highlights how individuals can begin participating in sports, addresses social and cultural barriers that deter engagement, and encourages young people to see sports as part of their identity rather than merely entertainment. This bottom-up framing stands in stark contrast to the top-down logic of mainstream sports media.

Afour's civic function is strengthened by the relatability of its hosts. Abdulla, as a Qatari founder, provides cultural grounding and a sense of authenticity, while Cameron brings an additional multicultural perspective that reflects Qatar's diverse demographic landscape. Together, they create an inviting space where listeners feel spoken with rather than spoken to. The podcast is bilingual, produced in both Arabic and English, which broadens its accessibility and breaks down the linguistic segmentation typical of Qatar's media system, where language choices often correspond to demographic separations. Afour therefore models a more inclusive form of community media that mirrors Qatar's real social dynamics.

Furthermore, the podcast adds value to public health discourse. While mainstream outlets may mention rising obesity rates or health concerns in passing, they do not consistently frame sports as a personal and communal necessity. Afour does. Through its stories, advice, and candid reflections, Afour encourages youth and everyday adults to adopt sport not as a nationalistic ideal but as a lifestyle that enhances wellbeing, social cohesion, and confidence. Its episodes act as civic interventions that address a major social problem through informal peer-to-peer influence.

By doing so, Afour takes on a role that mainstream media- despite its prestige and resources- has not fulfilled. It provides the relational, culturally attuned push that top-down campaigns often lack. Afour thus plays a vital grassroots role in shaping Qatar's sportocracy: a bottom-up, participatory culture of physical activity and community sports engagement.

3. Afour's Digital Footprint: YouTube as Evidence of Its Hybrid Alternative-Mainstream Identity

Afour's status as alternative media becomes clearer through its actual digital presence, particularly on YouTube (www.youtube.com/@AFOUR-su4zy). The channel's scale and structure provide empirical evidence that supports both themes in this essay.

With approximately 600–700 subscribers and over 80 uploaded videos, Afour's YouTube channel remains modest in reach, consistent with a grassroots platform rather than a mainstream broadcaster. Its audience grows slowly and organically instead of through institutional amplification or aggressive monetization. This modest but steady digital footprint reinforces

Afour's community-centered identity. It suggests a platform motivated more by engagement and conversation than by metrics-driven performance.

More importantly, Afour's content strategy reflects its grassroots sports mission. The channel features long-form podcast episodes, often running between one and two hours. These extended conversations give visibility to everyday members of Qatar's sporting community—local athletes, coaches, enthusiasts, and people with personal stories about their relationship to sport, health, or cultural belonging. The relatively low view counts on these longer videos (typically 100–300 views) indicate that Afour operates within a niche but dedicated community. This reinforces the claim that Afour is building sportocracy at the grassroots level rather than targeting mass entertainment.

Simultaneously, the channel uploads short-form motivational clips, such as “*Short-Term Sacrifices for a Lifetime of Health!*”, which function as micro-interventions promoting healthy behavior. These clips often reach higher view numbers than long episodes, reflecting contemporary patterns of youth media consumption. They allow Afour to connect quickly with audiences who may not commit to long-form podcasts, and they amplify the podcast's civic messaging through accessible, shareable formats.

Yet the most striking aspect of Afour's YouTube presence (and the one that introduces complexity) is its production quality. The videos are visually polished, featuring professional lighting, clear audio, multi-camera setups, refined editing, and branded thumbnails. This sophisticated aesthetic mirrors mainstream media standards and demonstrates a deliberate investment in production. While this enhances credibility and viewer appeal, it also introduces the professionalization paradox: Afour's visual identity resembles that of institutional media even though its content and mission remain community-driven.

Thus, Afour's YouTube channel embodies a hybrid identity. It simultaneously validates Afour's status as alternative media- through its modest reach, everyday guests, and grassroots framing- while also complicating that status through the high level of professionalism that shapes its visual narrative. This digital evidence strengthens the central argument of the essay: Afour is both alternative and partially mainstream, existing in a liminal space that reveals the evolving nature of media in Qatar.

4. Afour's Professionalization Paradox: Navigating the Space Between Alternative Ethos and Mainstream Appeal

The professionalization paradox becomes more apparent when moving beyond digital analytics to deeper conceptual analysis. Traditional theories of alternative media emphasize low-budget aesthetics, do-it-yourself methods, informal production processes, and a rejection of institutionalized visual norms. These qualities are not coincidental; they are symbolic embodiments of resistance. A rough aesthetic communicates authenticity, autonomy, and detachment from commercial imperatives.

Afour, however, challenges this assumption. Despite being rooted in an alternative ethos, it adopts a refined aesthetic rarely associated with grassroots media. The cinematic quality of their event documentaries, complete with drone footage and professional sound design, contrasts sharply with the handheld, DIY aesthetic of classic alternative media. This polished production is a strategic decision to meet the high visual expectations of Qatar's digitally engaged youth. Their content is strategically repackaged into polished Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts, formats that prioritize shareability and align with the platform norms their audience consumes daily. This

professionalism ensures relevance in a crowded digital landscape where purely amateur productions struggle for visibility.

Yet professionalization comes with risks. As alternative media begins to resemble mainstream forms visually, it becomes susceptible to a slow drift toward mainstream norms. This can manifest in subtle pressures: the need for brand partnerships, the temptation to select higher-profile guests for broader appeal, or an inclination to avoid controversial topics that might deter sponsors. Over time, such shifts may dilute the raw authenticity that originally defined Afour's alternative identity.

That said, Afour does not appear to have abandoned its core mission and its enduring ethos is perfectly captured in episodes like in their collaboration with the Samla race wherein not only dozens of the non-professional race participants were interviewed, but so were the often unseen organizers, and in the persistent, unscripted Q&A vlogs where Abdulla answers viewer questions about beginner training with the same depth as discussing professional circuits. The deliberately retained 'ums,' pauses, and conversational tangents in the full-length podcasts which are raw and uncut signal a commitment to authentic dialogue over produced, click-worthy performance. Thus, Afour operates in a delicate balance: professional enough to attract engagement, yet grounded enough to maintain alternative credibility.

This balance is likely what gives Afour its unique appeal. In Qatar's evolving media landscape, entirely amateur productions struggle to gain traction, while fully mainstream productions often lack community intimacy. Afour bridges this divide. It demonstrates that alternative media in the Gulf does not need to embrace low production quality to be legitimate; instead, it can appropriate professional aesthetics while maintaining a community-driven core.

Section 5: Conclusion

Afour represents an important intervention in Qatar's media and cultural ecosystems. Through its grassroots advocacy for everyday sports participation, it addresses civic and cultural gaps that mainstream media has not meaningfully filled. At the same time, Afour's digital footprint and production choices reveal a compelling professionalization paradox: it remains deeply alternative in mission and content, yet increasingly mainstream in aesthetics and technical execution.

This dual identity does not diminish Afour's significance; it enhances it. In a media landscape where national branding often overshadows community needs, Afour offers a refreshing model of civic engagement- one that blends authenticity with accessibility, community intimacy with professional clarity, and grassroots storytelling with contemporary digital strategies. Afour stands as a new kind of alternative media platform in Qatar: one that challenges old binaries and reimagines how community voices can thrive in a modern, media-saturated society.

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