

A Heideggerian Conceptual Framework of Temporality and Visual Strategy in TikTok: Past, Present, and Future in Digital Engagement

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ABSTRACT

In essence, the rise of TikTok is a temporal phenomenon governed by an algorithmic logic that prioritises instantaneous relevance over static social links. While traditional research attributes virality to technology or psychology. This research argues that a philosophical approach to time is essential for understanding digital participation. By examining Martin Heidegger's existential phenomenology of ecstatic temporality, which encompasses past (Gewesen), present (Gegenwart), and future (Zukunft), this article introduces novel theoretical insights for analyzing video content strategies on TikTok. On the surface, this method appears as a diagnosis that reveals TikTok creators (and the platform's algorithm) produce content with time in mind rather than merely making abstract judgments about it. This practice challenges conventional wisdom about determining the "best time to post" content, suggesting that successful material resonates with how real people genuinely experience and navigate time—the past, present, and future. This synthesis of philosophy and digital media studies presents a critical tool for comprehending engagement. It offers both theoretical advancements and practical strategies for content creation in an era characterised by algorithmic temporality.

Keywords: Temporality, Martin Heidegger, TikTok, algorithm, digital engagement, visual strategy, social media, philosophy of time



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1 INTRODUCTION

TikTok, in fact, has been a significant cultural force as well as a digital platform. It was an incredibly new product, each element meticulously crafted on a whimsical and seemingly absurd algorithm that resembles a cosmic art feedback loop (Salzman, 2022). Only immediately relevant and appropriate content is rewarded, while content that lacks value and doesn't align with the algorithm's preferences at the time receives minimal attention, effectively marginalising it (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). Unlike previous iterations, TikTok's algorithm on the popular For You Page (FYP) prioritises immediate realtime bi-popular engagement (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022) over social connections and follower numbers (Ling et al., 2021).

TikTok algorithms operate on their own time scales. This shift mirrors the broader digital experience, which will eventually become the norm. Simply sharing an article or picture is no longer

sufficient; one must now carefully consider both the timing of posting and the subsequent tone of comments. The constant refreshment and fleeting nature of information further disrupts its flow (Limbachiya, 2025). Surprisingly, despite the widespread discussion about the “best times to post,” time has often been a rather superficial factor in academic research. The day and hour are simply when you schedule something, not necessarily what you’re interested in. Berger’s (2013) STEPPS model, the leading analytic model of viral content, restricts time as a central didactic principle (Matikainen 2015). This is particularly relevant for TikTok, which operates on an algorithm that prioritises “temporal immediacy” (Baumann et al., 2025). Ironically, while practitioners debate the “best time to post,” the academic literature tends to treat time as almost trivial—a scheduling issue rather than a fundamental one. Prominent approaches to understanding virality, such as Berger’s (2013) STEPPS model, emphasise social currency, emotion, and practical value as key mediating mechanisms. However, there has been little interest in time as a fundamental structuring philosophical principle (Matikainen, 2015). This gap is especially pronounced for TikTok, where the algorithm operates based on a kind of “temporal immediacy” (Baumann et al., 2025). One content creator expresses frustration, stating, “My content doesn’t receive as much engagement as everyone else’s, even though I post the same stuff.” This frustration often stems from misconceptions about the role of time (Johncarson, 2023).

This paper argues that to comprehend digital engagement on platforms like TikTok, we must reimagine time. Beyond chronological ordering, I propose that time is an existential and strategic medium. To support this, I draw on Martin Heidegger’s thoughts. In “Being and Time” (1927/1996), Heidegger asserts that there’s no a priori access to temporality as the horizon of Dasein. We exist in time, not of it, and our individual identity emerges from the ceaseless flow between our pasts, present (our differences), and futures that propel us forward. Consequently, this paper poses the question: What insights can a Heideggerian philosophy of temporality provide about TikTok’s strategies of visual culture production and the logic of algorithmic engagement? I propose an alternative framework that integrates Heidegger’s threefold temporality with the visual and algorithmic machinations of the platform. From this perspective, I’ll explore how successful content creators intuitively or deliberately grasp “framing time” through visual narratives of memory (past), immediacy (present), and aspiration/anticipation (future). This approach challenges reductionist, plan-oriented advice and offers a more nuanced, philosophically grounded explanation for the appeal of digitally mediated now.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Philosophy of Time: From Chronos to Kairos

Two Greek concepts of time, Chronos (the quantitative, linear kind) and Kairos (the qualitative, opportune moment), have dominated philosophical engagement with it. Most contemporary digital analyses have dealt with Chronos—the analytics of time, duration, and posting schedules—and not considered Kairos as a principle for creative strategy (Esposito 2017). The work of Heidegger itself is a coming to terms with time as something other than mere chronology. Time: Heidegger argues that the truth of Being is the transcendental horizon (or condition) for human temporality. Our existence is primordially directed towards the future (“ahead-of-it-self”), although it remains always already thrown (being-already-in) and acting within a past (being-with-alongside) and present (Heidegger, 1996). This felicitous coincidence is more a range than it is a chain, no matter how often the story is told, and less of a sequence than an infrastructure of care and possibility. Later phenomenologists, including Husserl (1991) and Bergson (1991), also developed the idea of time as lived experience (*durée*): a continuous river of self-awareness incapable of being reduced to measurement. Those kinds of philosophical underpinnings are an antidote to the metric-driven mindset that you see so much in social media analysis.

2.2 Algorithmic Temporality and Platform Logic

Social media platforms today construct unique ‘temporal architectures’ (Miyazaki, 2020). Instagram and Facebook, for instance, have long employed a chronological feed that reinforces linear time.

However, TikTok represents a transition towards "algorithmic temporality," where predictive analytics and real-time user interaction govern platform time (Bishop, 2023). Its FYP algorithm functions as a temporal gatekeeper, selectively allowing content that elicits immediate engagement (likes, shares, watch time) within a limited critical window (Lupinacci, 2024). Consequently, content that fails to generate this instant reaction is easily overshadowed, regardless of its quality (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). This phenomenon creates an atmosphere of 'ephemeral opportunitisation' (Alessandro Caliandro et al., 2024), where the success lies in capturing the fleeting nature of the algorithmic moment. As Vera and Ghosh (2025) observe, the FYP serves as a "temporal space" that is continuously refreshed based on up-to-the-minute engagement metrics.

2.3 Virality, Engagement, and the Gap in Temporal Analysis

There is a lot of research on virality and engagement. The work of Berger (2013) on the STEPPS model identifies significant factors such as social currency and emotion. Quantitative research frequently associates virality with specific content attributes such as emotion, surprise, and practical value (Berger & Milkman, 2012). Studies specifically examining behavior on TikTok commonly mention trending audio (Ling et al., 2021; Zhou, 2023), duet/stitch features, video formats (e.g., POV), and the perceived authenticity of the creator.

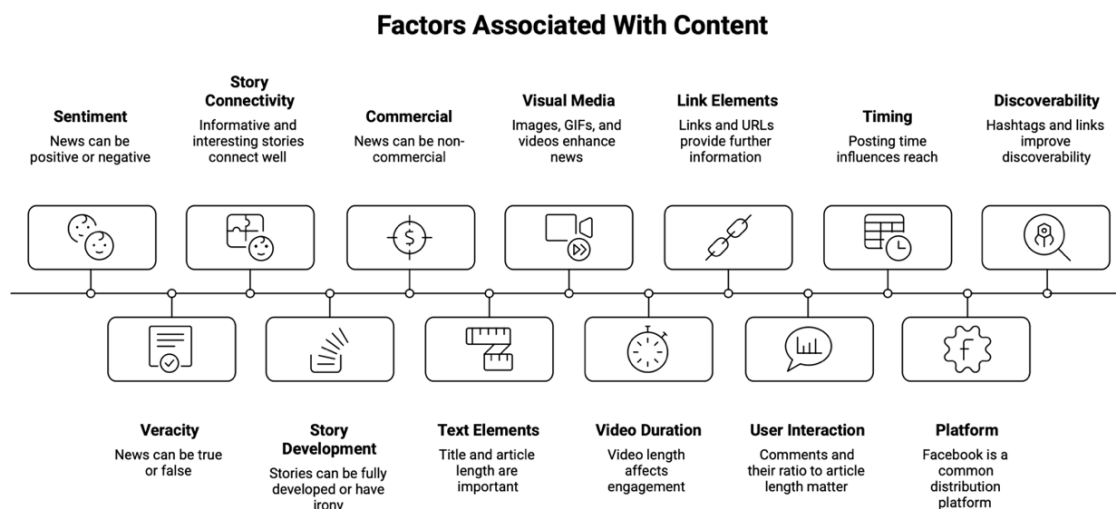


Figure 1 *Factors Associated with Content*

However, a significant gap persists. Systematic reviews, including the one conducted by Noor and Kamal (2020) on 35 studies examining online virality (Figure 1), indicate that time largely becomes treated as a secondary technical variable ("posting time"). Rarity as a narrative form, as a phenomenological experience, or as a creative strategy. Studies that consider TikTok as a real-time logic also evolve, viewing time as a constraint rather than a resource for the creator (Baumann et al., 2025). This lacuna highlights that the use of Heideggerian phenomenology—which makes time experience central to human understanding—to study digital content is something new.

Some scholars have begun interpreting Heidegger's thought in relation to technology, often drawing on his later concept of the "enframing" (Gestell) of modern technology (Heidegger, 1977). However, fewer scholars have directly connected his early work on temporality with the practices of social media. A few exceptions include studies that have explored the concept of "presencing" oneself online (Munn, 2020) or even the temporal rhythms of digital labor (Gillings, 2021). This paper contributes to this ongoing conversation by analyzing Heidegger's ideas through the specific visual logics and algorithmic affordances of a large social platform.

3 METHODOLOGY

The research method employed will be qualitative interpretation. This approach is appropriate for studies that concentrate on meaning, experience, and philosophical concepts (Harper and Thompson, 2012). Unlike statistical generalisability, the objective is to attain a profound comprehension through a multi-method design that encompasses three types of data, i.e. content analysis, interview, and philosophical interpretation.

3.1 Content Analysis of High-Engagement TikTok Videos

A purposeful sample of 30 to 50 Malaysian TikTok videos will be collected. Good and high engagement, or viral videos (views of 10,000 are clearly good, 100,000 indicate strong engagement, and those exceeding 500,000 to 1 million have a likes-to-views ratio greater than 10%), will be selected and labeled as “Good/High” and “viral.” A qualitative visual and narratological analysis will be conducted, with a specific focus on explicit and implicit temporal strategies. These strategies will then be compared with various open-coding categories that emerged from the Heideggerian framework, such as “invocation of the past,” “seizing the present trend,” and “future-oriented narrative.”

3.2 In-depth Phenomenological Interviews

Method: Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with eight to ten TikTok content creators in Malaysia who are actively producing good and viral content. These interviews, lasting between 45 and 60 minutes, will delve into three key aspects: (a) the artists’ intuitive grasp of “timing” and the algorithm, (b) their creative process for framing narratives, and (c) their perceptions of how past, present, and future-oriented thinking influences their work. The transcribed interviews will be analyzed inductively.

3.3 Philosophical Interpretation

Heidegger’s philosophical framework will be intricately interwoven with empirical observations from content analysis and interviews. This interpretative endeavor aims to construct a comprehensive understanding of how existential temporality manifests in TikTok as a practical and strategic domain. This concept is significant because it explains how the dimension of time shape’s identity, progress, and human interactions with the world. This approach aligns with the study’s objective, which investigate how time (temporality) functions as a visual strategy in fostering engagement and virality of visua content on TikTok. Heidegger’s notion of time (temporality) establishes a robust theoretical framework that contributes to comprehending the multifaceted role of time, not only as a technical constraint in social media (such as posting time, duration of visual content, or view rate), but also as a visual strategy that has proven effective in creating visually appealing content capable of achieving high visibility rates on social media platforms.

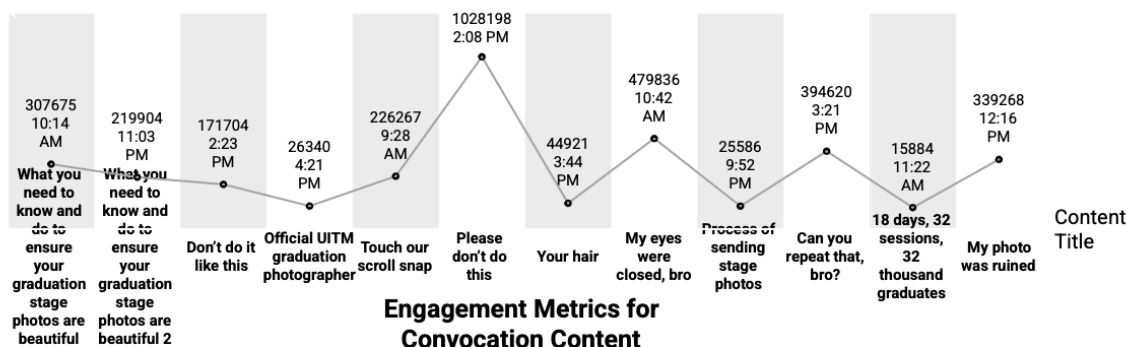


Figure 2 Engagement Metrics for UiTM Convocation Content (Source: Sir Zahir TikTok)

Figure 2 serves as part of the supporting case study and features a self-researcher's experiment posting convocation-related content. This data is significant in my understanding of how virality can be achieved not by relying on "golden hours," but rather by reaching its temporal relevance (convocation) at a specific time (Alauddin et al., 2025). I'm currently experimenting with the concept of time to engage viewers in the present day who are engaged in conversations. This indirect approach also reaches viewers who have experienced similar convocations in the past, allowing them to share their stories and experiences. Ultimately, the content produced also reaches students who are currently studying and eagerly anticipate their turn to participate in a convocation in the future. These students gain inspiration and envision their future aspirations. The data collected from this self-examination demonstrates that the three methodologies introduced in this study can provide evidence that the conceptual framework presented can contribute to the development of innovative visual strategies that effectively capture and maintain viewer attention, ultimately leading to high levels of engagement.

4 DISCUSSION

4.1 Debunking the "Golden Hour": Temporality vs. Chronology

Empirically, the data in Figure 2 is a strong counterpoint to simplistic advice that suggests doing things in a specific order. At various times, such as 10:14 AM, 11:03 PM, and 2:23 PM, researcher ideas offering advice on convocation suddenly went viral. These instances appeared to be random. An idea uploaded at 2:08 PM on Wednesday garnered over a million views, despite being outside of any "ideal times" recommended by social media guides (as shown in Figure 2). This aligns with the model presented here. It wasn't that this content was "trending" at 1 p.m., but rather that its virality was triggered temporally (in relation to the current context of convocation season), rather than chronologically (an artifact specific to a particular time slot on an individual's timeline). The algorithm exhibited a preference for content that was "present-at-hand" to a wide audience at the time, regardless of the clock time. This supports Heidegger's concept of two times: a planned time and a time that holds meaning.

4.1 The Creator as "Dasein": Temporal Awareness in Practice

Successful creators often possess an intuitive, even embodied, sense of temporal strategic action, like what Heidegger referred to as ecstatic temporality. They actively monitor the "FYP pulse" to anticipate upcoming trends. Furthermore, creators intentionally evoke nostalgia. People instantly connect with nostalgic sounds from their childhood. It's not just passive consumption; it's an emotional experience that fosters a sense of shared memory. This approach utilizes the past to create a connection with the audience. Several writers discussed the concept of serial content. They planned Part 1 with the intention of having a clear concept for Part 2, encouraging viewers to return and anticipate the next installment. This forward-thinking narrative invites users to engage in their own future-oriented thinking.

4.3 The Algorithm as Temporal Architect

In my analysis, I demonstrate that the TikTok algorithm functions not only as a filter but also as a user temporality architect. When genuine spontaneity gained value, it incentivised content that could disrupt the user's experience most effectively. However, by personalising feeds based on past interactions, it intertwines individual and collective histories with the present moment. (Furthermore, the site's endless suggested videos subtly guide us toward a future of limitless browsing possibilities. Consequently, the FYP materialises a distorted yet potent version of ecstatic time, where ecstatic times are optimised for extended engagement and devotion to the platform.

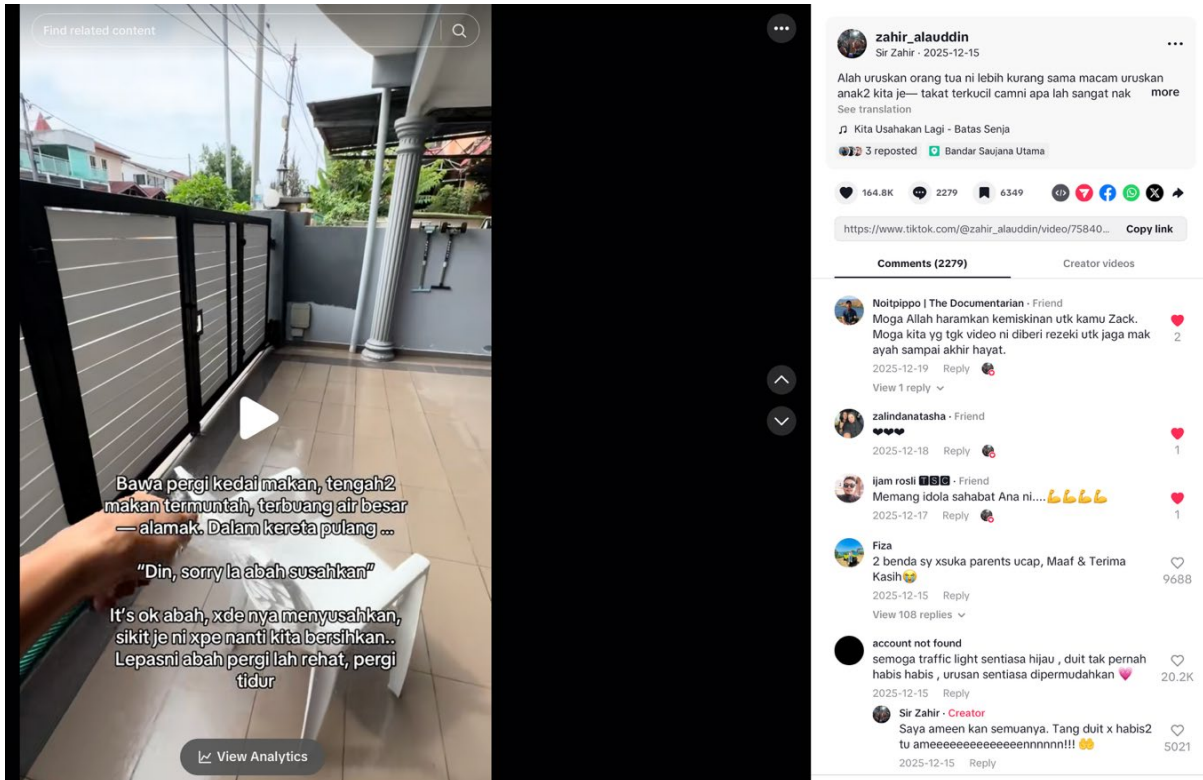


Figure 3 *It's Just a Small Matter*
(Source: Sir Zahir TikTok)

For example, content about the challenges of managing a father produced by me on TikTok using the nickname Sir Zahir (Figure 3), which is an experiment to see the integration of past (Gewesen), present (Gegenwart), and future (Zukunft), was judged to be successful. In this content, I share a story about my father, who suddenly defected and vomited when we took him out for breakfast at the restaurant. But I managed to clean and get him ready from the start, helping him put on clean and comfortable clothes before he fell asleep. This content was shared on December 15, 2025, and has already received 1.3 million views. It has 165,000 likes, 2,279 comments, 9,132 shares, and 6,349 saves. This video touches the sad feelings of all viewers because it reminds them of their fathers.



Figure 4 *Example comments from It's Just a Small Matter content*
(Source: Sir Zahir TikTok)

For example, Ezzate Hatta commented, “He reminds me of my late mom. Once they fell out of the stoma bag of my mother’s soul on the way to the toilet. At the time, I didn’t want to be in a situation where I had to deal with my own feelings of guilt. People don’t even ask to trouble their children.” This shows that the audience has experienced the same situation in the past. Another example is Afe_Rafe’s comment, “I also experienced the same thing; We must be prepared; Pampers clothes must be worn. Supplies, as we do with small children. Ready with bag powder and complete clothing wipes. May Allah protect us who take care of the elderly”. This shows that he is experiencing the same situation of taking care of the elderly (present). Finally, Hanani commented, “I hope I am strong and will not complain when I take care of my elderly like you, brother.” This shows the determination and planning that this audience will prepare in the future (Zukunft).

4.4 Conceptual Framework: A Heideggerian Model for TikTok Engagement

To bridge the gap between philosophical temporality and digital practice, I propose the following conceptual framework (see Figure 3). The model illustrates the process of TikTokers’ engagement, characterised by a dynamic interaction between Heidegger’s ecstatic temporality, mediated by the algorithm (system), and executed as a visual strategy. The primary argument of this article is that captivating TikTok content embodies a synthesised temporality derived from Heideggerian phenomenology. I employ a didactic or intuitive approach to construct stories that simultaneously evoke the past (Gewesen) through nostalgic aesthetics, memetic formats, or personal archival footage. These elements serve as mechanisms to establish a foundational sense of shared identity and belonging. Simultaneously, the content seizes the present (Gegenwart) by positioning itself within trending audio, participatory challenges, and real-time interactive hooks.

I strategically place these elements at the top to capture users’ attention and satisfy the algorithm’s insatiable hunger for engagement. Furthermore, the content projects towards the future (Zukunft) by integrating aspirational visuals into serialised storytelling and goal-oriented teasers. These elements invite viewers to invest in an ongoing story world and envision themselves anew. This triadic temporal architecture transforms passive consumption into a gradual form of followership and encourages favor from algorithms. This mimetic imitation of the user’s existential in-time mode-of-being instigates a continuous feedback loop between lived experience, curated content, and platform logic.

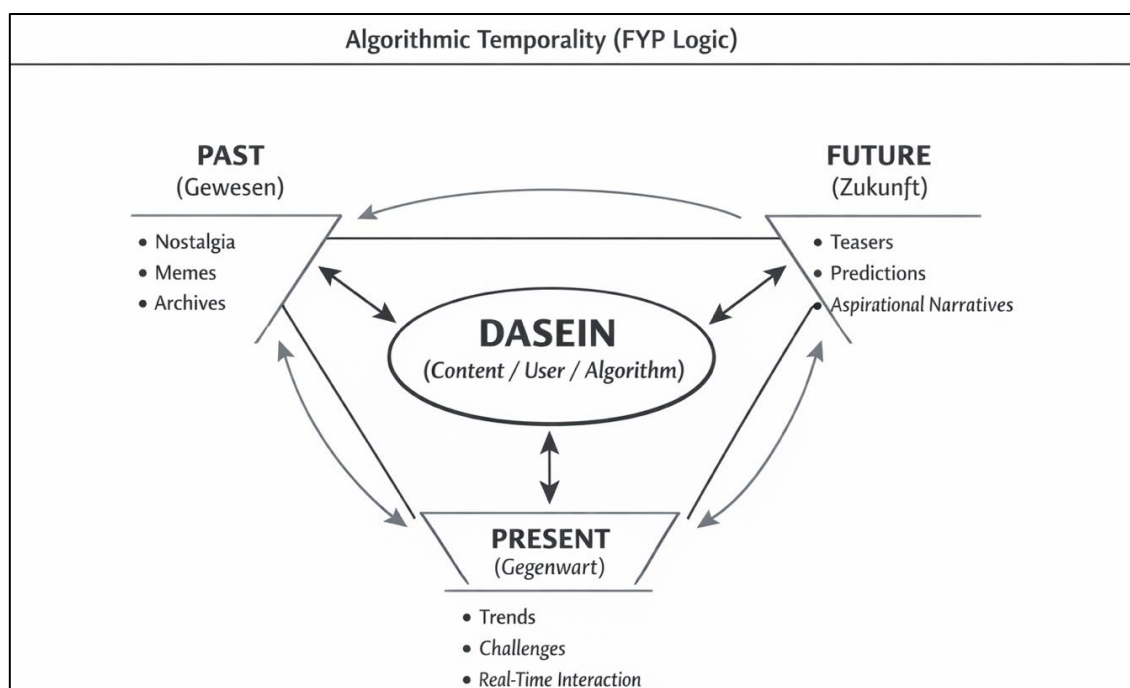


Figure 5 A Heideggerian Conceptual Framework of Algorithmic Temporality (FYP Logic)

Heidegger argues that humans experience time (temporality) to comprehend existence (Being). He asserts that the understanding of time is intrinsically linked to human existence (Dasein) (Martin Heidegger, 1996). This aligns with Islamic thought as well. In Islamic thought, humans are creatures who exist and are placed within time. As previously discussed, humans exist and live in relation to the past (memory, history, heritage, etc.), the present (what is happening and being done by humans), and the future (expectations, possibilities, planning). These elements collectively form the concept of human existence (Dasein) in time (temporality). (Martin Heidegger, 1996). When we consider human existence as temporal, we recognise that time is not an objective entity but rather a horizon that enables humans to understand themselves and their world. As Heidegger famously stated in his masterpiece, *Sein Und Zeit* (Being and Time, 1927), time (temporality) serves as the ontological foundation of existence. (Martin Heidegger, 1996).

5 CONCLUSION

This paper contends that comprehending digital engagement, particularly on platforms like TikTok that are temporal and reflective, necessitates a philosophical shift in our understanding of time. Drawing on Martin Heidegger's existential phenomenology of time and analyses of digital media, I propose a theoretical perspective that challenges the limited view of time as a linear progression. TikTok time is not a linear timeline but a dynamic field of strategic possibilities. It encompasses the "past" as a reservoir of living memory and nostalgia, the "present" as a fleeting moment of algorithmic capture and trendy opportunities, and the "future" as a sequenced horizon of expectations facilitated by serial storytelling and aspirational prospects. The platform's algorithm acts as a filter, favoring content that aligns with this temporal field.

The case study material effectively dispels the myth of the "golden hour," demonstrating that virality is more a matter of timing (Kairos) than strict adherence to a fixed schedule (Chronos). This chapter bridges Continental philosophy and digital media studies, providing a robust and anti-technocentric framework for analyzing platforms' logics and engagements centered around human experiences of time. The proposed framework offers strategic tools for content creators, marketers, and educators. It advises seeking the optimal posting time, cultivating temporal dexterity, auditing current trends (present), accessing cultural memory (past), and engaging users with narratives that encourage ongoing participation (future).

The study, a conceptual and qualitative exploration, focused solely on Malaysian TikTok from a single philosophical perspective. In the future, I believe it would be intriguing to quantitatively verify the association between multi-temporal content features and engagement metrics. To enhance the model, cross-platform trends like Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts should be compared. Crucially, research must address the ethical implications of this "algorithmic temporality." The constant pursuit of an ever-present now harms creator well-being and cultural memory and erodes our collective sense of time.

In an era where everything is algorithmically shaped, it is not merely an academic luxury but an urgent necessity to reclaim a time philosophy. By acknowledging, as Heidegger emphasised, our fundamental temporal nature, we can become more discerning and proactive in our interactions with the digital (and non-digital) worlds through which time now transitions into the future.

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ARTICLE CONTRIBUTION TO RELATED FIELD OF STUDY

The author was responsible for the conceptualisation and design of the study, including the integration of Heidegger's ecstatic temporality into the digital media framework. The author performed the qualitative data collection through semi-structured interviews and content analysis. Furthermore, the author conducted the self-researcher experiment (the 'Sir Zahir' case study) to empirically validate the triadic temporal strategy of past (*Gewesen*), present (*Gegenwart*), and future (*Zukunft*). The author also wrote, reviewed, and approved the final manuscript.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Each author contributes equally in this research.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors would like to declare that there are no conflicts of interests in this research.

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