





The geographies of ethics in Digital Humanities research: A critical analysis

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ABSTRACT

This paper explored the geographies of ethics in digital humanities research, examining how ethical practices are shaped by spatial, political, and social contexts. For the purpose of this research, the concept of geographies is understood not solely in spatial terms, but as psycho-social and socio-political spaces that are recursively constructed through research processes. Digital humanities represent a significant shift in the humanities and social sciences, blending computational technologies with critical, humanistic inquiry. As digital methods become increasingly central to research, they raise ethical concerns that demand careful reflection, particularly in relation to where and how research is conducted, funded, and reported. The central research question guiding this study is whether digital humanities research sufficiently recognizes and engages with the ethical implications of diverse geographies. Drawing on a comprehensive literature review of peer-reviewed articles and scholarly analyses, the study employed thematic synthesis to identify recurring concerns and patterns. The findings highlight tensions between technological standards and context-sensitive ethical frameworks, showing how digital technologies may both support and constrain ethical engagement across different geographical and institutional contexts. By mapping the ethical dimensions of digital humanities research through a geographic lens, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how ethics are enacted unevenly in global research landscapes, especially as digitalization continues to reshape scholarly practice.

Keywords: Geographies, Ethics, Digital Humanities, research, Literature Analysis

INTRODUCTION

The digital transformation of humanities research has redefined not only methodologies but also the ethical frameworks within which inquiry occurs, particularly when viewed through geographically diverse lenses. Digital humanities have transformed traditional research practices by introducing methodologies that enable more rapid and globally relevant forms of knowledge creation and dissemination.¹ With technology increasingly shaping research processes, it significantly contributes to the evolving landscape of knowledge production and the growing demands placed on academic inquiry.²

¹ M. A. Dzhukaeva, M I Muslimova, and G B Mamedova, “Digital Technology and Practices of Humanities Research,” in *SHS Web of Conferences*, vol. 172 (EDP Sciences, 2023), 05001; Michael Jopling et al., “Postdigital Citizen Science and Humanities: A Theoretical Kaleidoscope,” *Postdigital Science and Education* 7, no. 1 (2025): 31–77; Kaya Uzun, “Digital Humanities: Technology Integrated Social Sciences,” in *Proceedings of the 12th International New York Academic Research Congress on Social, Humanities, Administrative, and Educational Sciences 747–751. Istanbul: BZT Turan Publishing House, 2025.*, ed. M. C. Ogeyik and H. R. O. Zuniga, 2025.

² Joan E Dodgson, “Critical Analysis: The Often-Missing Step in Conducting Literature Review Research,” *Journal of Human Lactation* 37, no. 1 (2021): 27–32.

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However, digital research has also become the subject of controversy. Critical tensions arise regarding how data are obtained and processed, how hypotheses are formulated, and how results are communicated.³ These concerns raise the question of whether digital research practices are ethical, unethical, or balanced between benefits and risks.⁴ Ethical implications of technology in humanities research have been examined, with some scholars proposing context-sensitive frameworks, inclusive practices, and responsible data management strategies. For example, Kaya Uzun highlights the ethical responsibility of digital humanities research to ensure inclusivity by embracing a wide range of cultural and intellectual perspectives.⁵ As the integration of digital technologies into humanities research continues to reshape scholarly methodologies and epistemologies, the ethical implications of this integration have become increasingly complex. Yet, what remains underexplored in the literature is a nuanced understanding of how ethical standards are interpreted and practised across diverse geographies. This gap forms the basis for the present study.

Existing literature shows that digital technology in humanities research transcends spatial and temporal constraints, offering innovative alternatives to traditional scholarly communication.⁶ Among its many advantages are adaptability, interactivity, and the capacity for more inclusive communication compared to traditional media such as print, radio, and television.⁷ Furthermore, digital research has increased collaboration among researchers globally, enriching the quality and insight of academic work.⁸ While the ethical implications of digital research have received increasing attention, their geographical and cultural variability has not been sufficiently analysed. This article seeks to address that gap by examining how ethical concerns in digital humanities research are articulated, negotiated, and practiced across diverse geographies. We present a systematic literature review that investigates the opportunities, challenges, and risks posed by digital technologies in relation to ethical standards in different contexts.

There is compelling evidence that digital technologies have fundamentally reshaped global research practices.⁹ Unlike studies such as Hepworth and Church, Uzun, and Oza, which focus in depth on the origins or platforms of digital research, the aim of the study is more general: to explore whether and how digital research recognizes diverse geographies in its ethical standards and practices.¹⁰ This paper critically analyses the ethical implications of emerging technologies in humanities research while deliberately excluding conceptual debates on the definitions, boundaries, or origins of digital technologies.

METHODOLOGY

Published work provides a starting point for additional analyses, opinions, refutations, and discussion.¹¹ Likewise, this paper employed a qualitative literature analysis to critically examine ethical practices in digital humanities research across diverse geographies. This method envisages a combination of knowledge and understanding of what is written, evaluation and judgment skills, including the ability to

³ Andreas Görz, "Ethical Precarity in Rural Tourism Labor," *Tourism Geographies* 26, no. 1 (2024): 112–30.

⁴ Lorraine Kisselburgh and Jonathan Beever, "The Ethics of Privacy in Research and Design: Principles, Practices, and Potential," in *Modern Socio-Technical Perspectives on Privacy* (Springer, 2022), 395–426.

⁵ Uzun, "Digital Humanities: Technology Integrated Social Sciences."

⁶ Tang Chengcai et al., "The Model and Path for Digital Cultural Tourism to Promote Rural Revitalization," *Journal of Resources and Ecology* 15, no. 3 (2024): 528–40.

⁷ Georg Glaze, "Geographical Research in the Digital Humanities: Ethical Concepts, Methods and Approaches," in *Language(s), Discourse(s), Space(s) and Their Transformations in the Digital Age*, ed. F. Dammann and D. Kremer (Bielefeld: Bielefeld University Press, 2024), 44–61.

⁸ Dzhukaeva, Muslimova, and Mamedova, "Digital Technology and Practices of Humanities Research."

⁹ Chengcai et al., "The Model and Path for Digital Cultural Tourism to Promote Rural Revitalization"; Jopling et al., "Postdigital Citizen Science and Humanities: A Theoretical Kaleidoscope"; Kisselburgh and Beever, "The Ethics of Privacy in Research and Design: Principles, Practices, and Potential."

¹⁰ Katherine J Hepworth and Christopher Church, "Racism in the Machine: Visualization Ethics in Digital Humanities Projects," *ArXiv Preprint ArXiv:2411.17704*, 2024; Uzun, "Digital Humanities: Technology Integrated Social Sciences"; Priya Oza, "Digital Humanities—An Introduction," Mumbai: University of Mumbai, 2020, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343774514>.

¹¹ Sohail A., Cheema and Muhammad B. Imran, "Research Is Incomplete Unless Published," *Pakistan Journal of Nuclear Medicine* 9, no. 1 (2019): 1–2; Hannah Snyder, "Literature Review as a Research Methodology: An Overview and Guidelines," *Journal of Business Research* 104 (2019): 333–39.

internalize, and structure them clearly and logically in writing.¹² The literature analysis in this paper also explores how institutional narratives shape ethical imperatives in research involving digital technology, while also laying the groundwork for further inquiry into the geographies of ethics in digital humanities research.

This study relies solely on a qualitative literature analysis method and does not incorporate any empirical data. This method validates current knowledge gaps and highlights deficiencies,¹³ in the ethical procedures employed in previous research with ethics in digital technology. The synthesis was conducted through a rigorous selection of peer-reviewed, Journal articles, book chapters, conference proceedings, and scholarly reports published between 2014 and 2025, that discuss ethics principles in digital research methodology, and those that review rural communities' geographies. These were identified through searches of online databases, such as Google scholar, JStor, Scopus, Web of Science, EBSCOhost, ProQuest and Electronic Journals. Key search terms included ethics in humanities research, geographies of research, research ethics, digital research methodology. After filtering for relevance, quality, and thematic alignment with the study objectives, a total of 114 scholarly sources were included in the synthesis.

Ethical Consideration

Whether knowledge is theoretical, fundamental, or applied, there is a need for ethical consideration.¹⁴ Ethical procedures for this paper include adhering to rigorous standards of citation and referencing. This research adhered to ethical standards; all sources referenced have been appropriately cited, ensuring proper acknowledgment of the original authors. Also, there is no bias in analysing reviewed literature; all ideas and arguments are presented accurately and without distortion. AI-assisted technologies were only used in the writing process to improve the readability and language of the manuscript.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature examines the intersection of digital technologies and humanities research, with particular attention to the ethical implications arising from the use of digital tools in scholarly inquiry.

Digitalization of Humanities Research (DHR)

As new technological developments continue to emerge, research methodologies have adapted to meet global demands. The rise of digital humanities research has not only expanded the geographic scope of research but also its demographic reach, enabling broader participation and more diverse contributions.¹⁵ The advent of digital technologies has granted humanities researchers access to resources and methods that were previously inaccessible or prohibitively expensive.¹⁶ Numerous digital platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, are now employed in research settings. However, this study does not focus on analysing individual platforms. Instead, it aims to assess how the general shift from traditional to computer-based methodologies aligns with ethical standards across diverse geographies.

Although ethical concerns have long existed in research, the digitalization of methodologies has intensified ethical questions and dilemmas.¹⁷ Key among these concerns is how researchers distinguish between public and private data, and how publicly accessible information should be ethically treated.¹⁸ These issues have prompted a growing call for context-specific ethical guidelines tailored to the realities of digital research. Importantly, ethical concerns in digital research are not limited to technical usage. As Hepworth and Church argue, no technology, whether digital or analogue, is value-neutral or

¹² Sebastian K Boell and Dubravka Cezec-Kecmanovic, "On Being 'Systematic' in Literature Reviews in IS," *Journal of Information Technology* 30, no. 2 (June 1, 2015): 161–73, <https://doi.org/10.1057/jit.2014.26>.

¹³ Dodgson, "Critical Analysis: The Often-Missing Step in Conducting Literature Review Research."

¹⁴ Marie-Josée Drolet, Pier-Luc Turcotte, and Bryn Williams-Jones, "Ethical Challenges in Digital Humanities: A Scoping Review," *Journal of Academic Ethics* 21, no. 2 (2023): 245–63.

¹⁵ Dzhukaeva, Muslimova, and Mamedova, "Digital Technology and Practices of Humanities Research."

¹⁶ Dzhukaeva, Muslimova, and Mamedova, "Digital Technology and Practices of Humanities Research."

¹⁷ Vic Dan et al., "Ethical Research in the Digital Age: Addressing the Policy Gap for Online Research Settings," *Unpublished Manuscript*, May 2024; Katrin Tiidenberg, "Ethics in Digital Research," *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Collection*, 2018, 466–79.

¹⁸ Tiidenberg, "Ethics in Digital Research."

separable from human bias and power dynamics.¹⁹ This highlights the need to treat digital tools as embedded within social and cultural systems, rather than as objective instruments.

Recent literature reviews have addressed the general impacts of digital technology on research practices, our analysis narrows the focus to ethical concerns specific to diverse geographical contexts. While digital humanists are increasingly aware of the ethical implications of their work, persistent issues such as inequitable digital access, especially for marginalized communities, remain under-addressed.²⁰ This raises critical questions not only about research ethics but also about equitable participation in global research ecosystems.

Ethics in Digital Humanities Research

The introduction of ethics principles emerged as a response to widespread unethical research practices in the twentieth century, and they were developed to protect participants from harm and exploitation.²¹ These frameworks, now foundational to academic inquiry, seek to safeguard the rights, dignity, and autonomy of research participants across disciplines.²² While ethical principles such as objectivity, integrity, adequacy, voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and data minimization remain central,²³ their practical application is increasingly context-dependent. Crucially, ethical behaviours and expectations are deeply shaped by geographical, cultural, and infrastructural factors.²⁴ For instance, Western institutions may often be rooted in individual autonomy and data privacy, while other sociopolitical contexts, such as collectivist or communal societies, are more rooted in relational and communal ethics.²⁵ These contrasts reveal how global digital research may inadvertently impose dominant ethical models that conflict with local value systems or epistemologies.²⁶

To explore these complexities, this paper adopts a critical geography lens to analyse how concepts such as space, place, and power inform ethical decision-making in digital research. Such disparities also call for ethical pluralism: flexible frameworks that uphold participant rights while respecting cultural integrity and local norms.²⁷

¹⁹ Hepworth and Church, "Racism in the Machine: Visualization Ethics in Digital Humanities Projects."

²⁰ Farzaneh Tahmasebi, "The Digital Divide: A Qualitative Study of Technology Access in Rural Communities," *AI and Tech in Behavioral and Social Sciences* 1, no. 2 (2023): 33–39.

²¹ Kisselburgh and Beever, "The Ethics of Privacy in Research and Design: Principles, Practices, and Potential."

²² Kapil Dev, "A Study of Research Ethics and Challenge," *Global International Research Thoughts* 12, no. 2 (2024): 7–11; Chiara De Poli and Jan Oyebo, "Research Ethics and Collaborative Research in Health and Social Care: Analysis of UK Research Ethics Policies, Scoping Review of the Literature, and Focus Group Study," *Plos One* 18, no. 12 (2023): e0296223; Ronel Smith and Larry Stillman, "Ethics Issues and Research in Vulnerable Communities: A Case Study from the North West Province of South Africa," in *Challenges and Solutions: Paper Presented at the 11th Prato CIRN Conference*, 2014, 13–15.

²³ Dzhukaeva, Muslimova, and Mamedova, "Digital Technology and Practices of Humanities Research"; Tiidenberg, "Ethics in Digital Research."

²⁴ Hao Chen et al., "Where You Are Is Who You Are? The Geographical Account of Psychological Phenomena," *Frontiers in Psychology* 11 (2020): 536.

²⁵ Donelson R. Forsyth, Ernest H. O'Boyle, and Michael A. McDaniel, "East Meets West: A Meta-Analytic Investigation of Cultural Variations in Idealism and Relativism," *Journal of Business Ethics* 83, no. 4 (December 2, 2008): 813–33, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-008-9667-6>; Nurettin İbrahimoglu, Şemsettin Çiğdem, and Mehmet Seyhan, "Relationship between Culture & Ethic: A Research in Terms of Cultural Diversity," *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences* 143 (2014): 1117–19.

²⁶ AzwiHangwisi Helen Mavhandu-Mudzusi, "Application of Ethics in the South African Rural Context," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 22 (2023): 16094069231193592; Thaddeus Metz, "The Virtues of African Ethics," in *The Handbook of Virtue Ethics* (Routledge, 2014), 276–84.

²⁷ Luchuo Engelbert Bain et al., "Community Engagement in Research in Sub-Saharan Africa: Current Practices, Barriers, Facilitators, Ethical Considerations and the Role of Gender-a Systematic Review," *The Pan African Medical Journal* 43 (2022): 152; Jonathan R. Kasstan, Graham Pearson, and Victoria Brooks, *Rethinking Research Ethics in the Humanities: Principles and Recommendations* (London: University of Westminster, 2023).

Digital Technology Accessibility

There is evidence from a wealth of literature that digital humanities research has extended even to very remote,²⁸ underdeveloped,²⁹ and rural populations.³⁰ However, this study does not analyse digital humanities as a methodology itself, but rather interrogates how ethical principles are interpreted and applied across diverse spatial, cultural, and socio-economic contexts within such research. While much of the literature has celebrated the emergence of digital technology in humanities research for enhancing global connectivity³¹ and accelerating access to information,³² the persistence of the digital divide, or "digital split",³³ remains a significant concern.

A stark gap exists between industrialized and developing nations,³⁴ and the fact that different countries experience divergent digital realities³⁵ raises important ethical questions regarding the assumption that digital research accelerates equitable access to information. The implication of ongoing inequalities in technology access, especially between the affluent and the poor,³⁶ is arguably an ethical issue. Even within developed countries, uneven technological penetration persists, prompting scholars like Chengcai to use the term "digital countryside" to describe such disparities.³⁷

In many countries, rural communities are disproportionately disadvantaged compared to urban populations.³⁸ These populations face a range of vulnerabilities, including poverty, resource scarcity, limited access to education and employment, and constrained public services.³⁹ It is therefore not surprising that rural areas are also sidelined in terms of technology access,⁴⁰ which again brings into question the ethical integrity of digital research practices. This rural-urban disparity in access is commonly referred to as the urban-rural digital divide.⁴¹ A geographic understanding of this inequity reveals how it perpetuates informational exclusion for already marginalized populations.

Even in countries striving to bridge the digital divide, challenges persist. A lack of educational infrastructure in rural areas contributes to low levels of digital literacy,⁴² leaving many potential research participants unequipped to engage with digital tools. While some research advocates for improved "digital inclusion" among disadvantaged groups,⁴³ geographical variability is often under-prioritized in ethical considerations.

Though the arguments above highlight technological challenges in rural settings, it is important to note that this paper does not focus on rural studies per se. Rather, it examines the broader landscape

²⁸ T. M. Sheykhan, "Internet Research Ethics: Digital Citizenship Education," in *Paper Presented at the Seminar on New Perspectives in Research, University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, India, November 17–18, 2017*.

²⁹ Ravneet, Kaur and Suresh Patel, "Digital Inclusion in Underdeveloped Regions: Challenges and Opportunities for Humanities Research," *International Journal of Digital Studies* 11, no. 2 (2019): 45–61.

³⁰ Lucy Mwangi, "Digital Humanities in Rural Africa: Bridging the Access and Participation Gap," *Journal of Global Humanities* 6, no. 1 (2021): 88–104.

³¹ Elisabeth Hildt and Kelly Laas, "Informed Consent in Digital Data Management," in *Codes of Ethics and Ethical Guidelines: Emerging Technologies, Changing Fields* (Springer, 2022), 55–81.

³² Dzhuksaeva, Muslimova, and Mamedova, "Digital Technology and Practices of Humanities Research."

³³ Gedala Mulliah Naidoo, "Digital Development of Rural Communities in Sub-Saharan Africa," *OIDA International Journal of Sustainable Development* 16, no. 12 (2023): 83–96.

³⁴ Naidoo, "Digital Development of Rural Communities in Sub-Saharan Africa"; Uzun, "Digital Humanities: Technology Integrated Social Sciences."

³⁵ Tahmasebi, "The Digital Divide: A Qualitative Study of Technology Access in Rural Communities."

³⁶ Jopling et al., "Postdigital Citizen Science and Humanities: A Theoretical Kaleidoscope." 82-96.

³⁷ Chengcai et al., "The Model and Path for Digital Cultural Tourism to Promote Rural Revitalization."

³⁸ Richard Appiah, "Community-Based Participatory Research in Rural African Contexts: Ethico-Cultural Considerations and Lessons from Ghana," *Public Health Reviews* 41, no. 1 (December 27, 2020): 27, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40985-020-00145-2>; Kimberly L. Kline et al., "Ethical Issues in Rural Community-Based Research: A Case Study from the Appalachian Region," *Journal of Rural Social Sciences* 29, no. 2 (2014): 45–68; Ahmad Rizal Salleh et al., "Challenges and Strategies of Rural Community Towards Sustainable Development," *Journal Kejuruteraan* 36, No. 5 (2024): 36, no. 5 (2024): 2239–49.

³⁹ Nor Kalsum Mustaffa and Che Mahzan Isa, "Challenges and Strategies of Rural Community Towards Sustainable Development," *Journal Kejuruteraan* 36, no. 5 (2024): 2239–49; Angelo Nicolaidis, "Ethical Considerations in Rural Tourism Development: A South African Perspective," *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure* 9, no. 3 (2020): 1–15; Lukáš Zastoupil, "Digital Exclusion in Rural Europe: A Comparative Analysis of Policy Frameworks," *Journal of Rural Studies* 88 (2021): 45.

⁴⁰ Tahmasebi, "The Digital Divide: A Qualitative Study of Technology Access in Rural Communities."

⁴¹ Naidoo, "Digital Development of Rural Communities in Sub-Saharan Africa."

⁴² Chengcai et al., "The Model and Path for Digital Cultural Tourism to Promote Rural Revitalization"; Tahmasebi, "The Digital Divide: A Qualitative Study of Technology Access in Rural Communities."

⁴³ Jopling et al., "Postdigital Citizen Science and Humanities: A Theoretical Kaleidoscope."

of digital research experiences. Barriers such as poor internet connectivity, limited digital skills, and low digital literacy⁴⁴ raise critical ethical concerns within digital humanities research. Digitalizing humanities without thoughtful attention to accessibility risks reinforces biases and perpetuates marginalization for already vulnerable communities.

Informed Consent

Informed consent has long been recognized as a central pillar in research involving human subjects.⁴⁵ Given the broad interpretations of the term, this study adopts the definition from the University College Dublin Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC), which frames informed consent as a process through which an individual voluntarily agrees to participate in a research study, having been fully informed about how their data will be used.⁴⁶ For consent to be valid, participants must be competent, and their agreement must be given freely.⁴⁷

Despite its significance, navigating informed consent has not always been a primary concern for digital researchers,⁴⁸ who often face pressure to accelerate data production and dissemination. This is further exacerbated by a general lack of knowledge, which may arise from limited access to information and low levels of digital literacy,⁴⁹ as discussed in previous sections. Critically, any deficit in a participant's understanding at any stage of the research process renders informed consent invalid.⁵⁰

Misinformation and disinformation are also well-documented risks within Digital Humanities Research (DHR), with misleading content often spreading faster than factual content.⁵¹ Misinformation can lead to real-world harm, and the susceptibility of digital research environments to such risks underscores the ethical vulnerability of DHR to both bias and data distortion.⁵²

While these challenges could suggest a general lack of ethical rigor among digital researchers, a more nuanced view acknowledges the practical difficulties they encounter. In many cases, researchers cannot always ascertain whether participants truly understand the information provided or can give meaningful consent.⁵³ This ambiguity increases the risk, both intentional and unintentional, of causing harm, such as through insecure electronic data transmission or the accidental release of sensitive information.⁵⁴

In digital humanities, especially in community-based research, ethical sensitivity to local cultural norms and values becomes essential. For example, in individualistic cultures, informed consent is typically framed around personal autonomy, where individuals make independent choices regarding

⁴⁴ Naidoo, "Digital Development of Rural Communities in Sub-Saharan Africa"; Tahmasebi, "The Digital Divide: A Qualitative Study of Technology Access in Rural Communities."

⁴⁵ De Poli and Oyebo, "Research Ethics and Collaborative Research in Health and Social Care: Analysis of UK Research Ethics Policies, Scoping Review of the Literature, and Focus Group Study."; William Bülow et al., "Should Social Science and the Humanities Have to Undergo Ethical Review?: A Normative Assessment of Four Common Arguments," 2024.

⁴⁶ Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC), "Guideline: Informed Consent in Research," Dublin: University College Dublin, 2021, <https://www.ucd.ie/researchethics/t4media>.

⁴⁷ Hildt and Laas, "Informed Consent in Digital Data Management"; C C Nnebue, "Informed Consent in Research," *Afrimedical Journal* 1, no. 1 (2010): 5–10.

⁴⁸ Jonathan Lewis, Vilius Dranseika, and Søren Holm, "Stop Agonising over Informed Consent When Researchers Use Crowdsourcing Platforms to Conduct Survey Research," *Clinical Ethics* (SAGE Publications Sage UK: London, England, 2023).

⁴⁹ Riccardo Nanni, Daan Huyskes, and Martina Napolitano, "Contact-Tracing and Privacy: A Digital Literacy and Information Question. The Italian Case," *Paper Presented at the Ethics of the Digital Annual Conference, University of Westminster, London, June 27, 2023*.

⁵⁰ Naresh Manandhar and Sunil Kumar Joshi, "Importance of Consent in the Research," *International Journal of Occupational Safety and Health* 10, no. 2 (2020): 89–91.

⁵¹ Hildt and Laas, "Informed Consent in Digital Data Management"; Toomas Timpka and James M Nyce, "Professional Ethics for Infectious Disease Control: Moral Conflict Management in Modern Public Health Practice," *Public Health* 221 (2023): 160–65.

⁵² Uzun, "Digital Humanities: Technology Integrated Social Sciences."

⁵³ Sheykhjan, "Internet Research Ethics: Digital Citizenship Education."

⁵⁴ Nnebue, "Informed Consent in Research."

participation.⁵⁵ By contrast, in collectivist cultures, participation may be influenced by communal values or a sense of obligation to a shared cause.⁵⁶

Importantly, universal ethical principles, often grounded in Western philosophical traditions, are not culturally neutral.⁵⁷ The dominance of Western-centric ethical models and digital infrastructures in DH research frequently renders them ill-suited for non-Western contexts, particularly African settings, where they may marginalize indigenous knowledge systems and Afro-ethical perspectives.⁵⁸ However, this does not suggest that individual agency is absent in communal cultures. As Zhen Wen, Shenghua Zhen, and Ruolei Yu assert, even within strongly community-oriented societies, moral decision-making ultimately rests with the individual.⁵⁹ Stephen Holland similarly emphasizes that freedom and mutual respect must coexist, reinforcing the need for an ethical framework that balances both individual and collective values.⁶⁰

Privacy and Confidentiality

In this section, privacy and confidentiality are used interchangeably to refer to the protection of personal or sensitive information from unauthorized access, disclosure, or misuse, ensuring participants' identities and data remain secure throughout the research process.⁶¹ The rise of digital technologies has, however, introduced heightened concerns around privacy. Specifically, digital tools have raised questions about how personal data is collected, stored, and used, often without full transparency or consent.⁶²

In response, many digital researchers have adopted ethically responsive practices such as anonymization or pseudonymization, employing tools like encryption, secure data storage, and data masking to protect participant information.⁶³ Nonetheless, anonymized datasets may still include indirect identifiers that could allow individuals to be re-identified when cross-referenced with external data sources.⁶⁴ Numerous data breaches have illustrated the risks, with high-profile cases where participants' personal data became publicly exposed or went viral.⁶⁵ Compounding these issues is the limited availability of robust cybersecurity infrastructure in some contexts, which undermines the ability to ensure digital confidentiality.⁶⁶ This deficit has clear implications for the overall integrity and reliability of digital humanities research. Digital technologies also blur the boundaries between what is considered public and private,⁶⁷ intensifying debates around digital data security and the potential for harm, whether social, emotional, financial, or otherwise.⁶⁸ Privacy concerns are not limited to personal data protection; they encompass broader dimensions, including protection from physical, psychological, decisional, and informational harm.⁶⁹

⁵⁵ İbrahimoglu, Çiğdem, and Seyhan, "Relationship between Culture & Ethic: A Research in Terms of Cultural Diversity"; Mavhandu-Mudzusi, "Application of Ethics in the South African Rural Context."

⁵⁶ İbrahimoglu, Çiğdem, and Seyhan, "Relationship between Culture & Ethic: A Research in Terms of Cultural Diversity"; Jopling et al., "Postdigital Citizen Science and Humanities: A Theoretical Kaleidoscope"; Ngozi Konye, *African Ethics: A Guide to Key Ideas*, ed. Jonathan O. Chimakonam and Luis Cordeiro-Rodrigues (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023).

⁵⁷ Mavhandu-Mudzusi, "Application of Ethics in the South African Rural Context"; Metz, "The Virtues of African Ethics."

⁵⁸ Bain et al., "Community Engagement in Research in Sub-Saharan Africa: Current Practices, Barriers, Facilitators, Ethical Considerations and the Role of Gender-a Systematic Review"; Jessica Carniel et al., "The Ethics Review and the Humanities and Social Sciences: Disciplinary Distinctions in Ethics Review Processes," *Research Ethics* 19, no. 2 (April 25, 2023): 139–56, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17470161221147202>. Seth Oppong, "When the Ethical Is Unethical and the Unethical Is Ethical: Cultural Relativism in Ethical Decision-Making," *Polish Psychological Bulletin* 50, no. 1 (2019).

⁵⁹ Shanshan Zhen and Rongjun Yu, "Moral Characteristics Predicting COVID-19 Vaccination," *Journal of Personality* 92, no. 3 (2024): 820–36.

⁶⁰ Stephen Holland, "Liberty, Public Health Ethics, and Policy Responses to COVID-19," *HUMANA. MENTE Journal of Philosophical Studies* 14, no. 40 (2021): 23–53.

⁶¹ Kasstan, Pearson, and Brooks, *Rethinking Research Ethics in the Humanities: Principles and Recommendations*.

⁶² Kisselburgh and Beaver, "The Ethics of Privacy in Research and Design: Principles, Practices, and Potential."

⁶³ Chengcai et al., "The Model and Path for Digital Cultural Tourism to Promote Rural Revitalization."

⁶⁴ J. Hildebrandt, *History of the Church in Africa* (Achimota Accra: Africa Christian Press, 1981).

⁶⁵ Aude Schoentgen and Laura Wilkinson, "Ethical Issues in Digital Technologies," in *Paper Presented at the 23rd Biennial Conference of the International Telecommunications Society, Gothenburg, Sweden, June 21–23, 2024*.

⁶⁶ Chengcai et al., "The Model and Path for Digital Cultural Tourism to Promote Rural Revitalization."529.

⁶⁷ Sheykhjan, "Internet Research Ethics: Digital Citizenship Education."18.

⁶⁸ Timpka and Nyce, "Professional Ethics for Infectious Disease Control: Moral Conflict Management in Modern Public Health Practice."

⁶⁹ Farina Madita Dobrick, Jana Fischer, and Lutz M Hagen, *Research Ethics in the Digital Age* (Springer, 2018); Kisselburgh and Beaver, "The Ethics of Privacy in Research and Design: Principles, Practices, and Potential."

In such a context, privacy is frequently compromised, sometimes unintentionally, due to technical or procedural oversight, and sometimes intentionally, due to deliberate ethical lapses.⁷⁰ Moreover, as with informed consent, the meaning and expectations of confidentiality vary significantly across cultural and social contexts. What constitutes ethically significant privacy can shift with changes in local norms or technological landscapes.⁷¹ Recruiting participants thus involves navigating complex concerns around how participants' content may be used, particularly when issues of risk and autonomy are involved.⁷²

Ethics Review Boards

Ethics research committees, commonly known as Institutional Review Boards (IRBs), are mandated to evaluate whether ethical standards have been met before researchers begin any study involving human subjects.⁷³ However, by their very nature, IRBs often lack a nuanced understanding of the specific fieldwork contexts and the communities under study.⁷⁴ This lack of proper insights poses significant challenges, particularly when digital humanities research spans multiple geographies or involves non-traditional data sources. As Maddalena Favaretto and her colleagues argue, research ethics policies frequently fail to keep up with the realities of international digital collaborations.⁷⁵ This includes IRBs' reluctance or inability to standardize review procedures or to engage meaningfully with novel ethical questions posed by digital methodologies.⁷⁶

At first glance, there may appear to be a plausible assertion that digital researchers are inherently unethical. However, upon closer inspection, it becomes evident that many ethical bottlenecks arise because IRBs remain tied to conventional review procedures.⁷⁷ Further complicating the situation is the limited availability of comprehensive codes of ethics, policies, and guidelines specifically addressing digital data management in research.⁷⁸ The gap between evolving research practices and institutional oversight frameworks poses a serious ethical risk. Across the reviewed literature, there is widespread consensus on the importance of ethical adherence in digital research.⁷⁹ This includes a growing call for both IRBs⁸⁰ and researchers themselves⁸¹ to adopt more context-sensitive and ethically sound approaches, especially in areas like data visualization, which can significantly influence how research outcomes are interpreted and disseminated.

Ethical Complexities in Digital Humanities Research

Digital research methods introduce inherent complexities that significantly elevate ethical risks, compounding the challenges discussed in previous sections. One of the most urgent concerns is data sovereignty, particularly in indigenous digital humanities projects. As Chengcai Tang and colleagues highlight, digital research frequently inherits serious data security vulnerabilities, often due to

⁷⁰ Chengcai et al., "The Model and Path for Digital Cultural Tourism to Promote Rural Revitalization"; Helen Nissenbaum, "Privacy in Context: Technology, Policy, and the Integrity of Social Life," in *Privacy in Context* (Stanford University Press, 2009).

⁷¹ Kisselburgh and Beever, "The Ethics of Privacy in Research and Design: Principles, Practices, and Potential."

⁷² Dobrick, Fischer, and Hagen, *Research Ethics in the Digital Age*.

⁷³ Bülow et al., "Should Social Science and the Humanities Have to Undergo Ethical Review?: A Normative Assessment of Four Common Arguments."

⁷⁴ Catherine El Ashkar et al., "Behind the Scenes of Research Ethics Committee Oversight: A Qualitative Research Study with Committee Chairs in the Middle East and North Africa Region," *BMC Medical Ethics* 25, no. 1 (2024): 86; Bülow et al., "Should Social Science and the Humanities Have to Undergo Ethical Review?: A Normative Assessment of Four Common Arguments."

⁷⁵ Maddalena Favaretto et al., "Working through Ethics Review of Big Data Research Projects: An Investigation into the Experiences of Swiss and American Researchers," *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics* 15, no. 4 (2020): 339–54.

⁷⁶ Ashkar et al., "Behind the Scenes of Research Ethics Committee Oversight: A Qualitative Research Study with Committee Chairs in the Middle East and North Africa Region."

⁷⁷ Bülow et al., "Should Social Science and the Humanities Have to Undergo Ethical Review?: A Normative Assessment of Four Common Arguments"; Dan et al., "Ethical Research in the Digital Age: Addressing the Policy Gap for Online Research Settings"; Anne Looijmans et al., "Ethical Review Procedures in International Internet-Based Intervention Studies," *Internet Interventions* (Elsevier, 2022).

⁷⁸ Hildt and Laas, "Informed Consent in Digital Data Management."

⁷⁹ Katherine, Hepworth and Christopher Church, "Emerging Ethical Concerns in Digital Visualization Practices," *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 9, no. 2 (2015): 1–18.

⁸⁰ Chengcai et al., "The Model and Path for Digital Cultural Tourism to Promote Rural Revitalization."

⁸¹ Hepworth and Church, "Racism in the Machine: Visualization Ethics in Digital Humanities Projects."

insufficient protective measures and a heavy reliance on generic, out-of-the-box digital models.⁸² In addition, the increasing use of algorithms in research poses ethical questions beyond technical efficiency. As Schoentgen and Wilkinson note, algorithmic decisions and the language embedded within digital tools⁸³ can subtly shape users' perceptions and emotional well-being.⁸⁴ Not only do algorithms in digital tools promote discrimination and biases, but they also amplify harmful content.

These tools not only mediate knowledge production but also risk causing unintended consequences such as information leakage and telecommunication fraud,⁸⁵ thereby exacerbating the vulnerability of participants and researchers alike. Moreover, emerging digital methodologies that seek to reinterpret space and place in social and cultural contexts introduce new layers of ethical complexity.⁸⁶ What is made clear in literature is that all the visible and invisible affordances of digital technology are a human exercise, encompassing all values of oppressions and inequalities.⁸⁷ These spatially aware technologies raise critical questions about representation, consent, and agency, especially in communities where digital research practices intersect with longstanding histories of marginalization.

Figure 1 below presents the conceptual framework synthesizing insights from digital ethics to illustrate how spatial, institutional, and relational dimensions intersect to shape ethical tensions in digital humanities research.

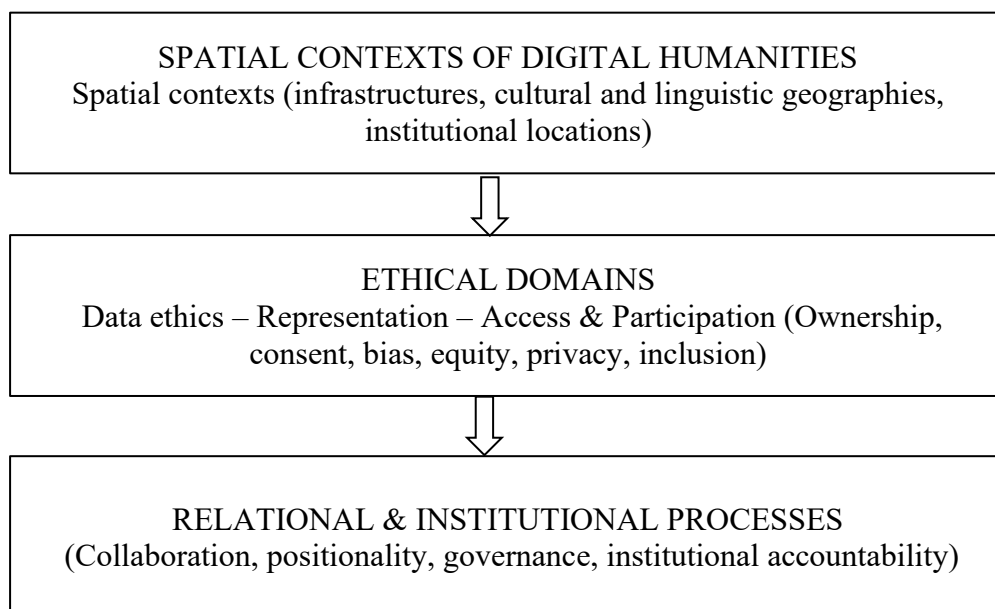


Figure 1 - conceptual framework

As shown in Figure 1 above, spatial divides foreground uneven access to digital infrastructures across diverse rural spaces. Data ethics interrogates the moral dimensions of digital representation, consent, and algorithmic bias, especially as they affect marginalized communities whose cultural data may be extracted or misinterpreted. Relational and institutional processes emphasize the situated, power-laden dynamics between researchers, participants, and academic systems, calling for reflexive, context-sensitive engagements that honor local epistemologies and ethical accountability. Together, these layers illuminate how ethical practice in digital humanities is not merely procedural but deeply spatial, political, and relational.

⁸² Chengcai et al., "The Model and Path for Digital Cultural Tourism to Promote Rural Revitalization."

⁸³ Jopling et al., "Postdigital Citizen Science and Humanities: A Theoretical Kaleidoscope."

⁸⁴ Tiidenberg, "Ethics in Digital Research."

⁸⁵ Tiidenberg, "Ethics in Digital Research."

⁸⁶ Safiya Umoja Noble, "Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism," in *Algorithms of Oppression* (New York university press, 2018).

⁸⁷ Johanna, Drucker et al., "Digital Humanities: The Expanded Field," *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 7, no. 2 (2013).

Through literature analysis and synthesis, it is evident that as a new and increasingly popular discipline, digital technology sparks its fair share of debate and controversy. The synthesis of literature highlights that ethical practices in digital humanities are deeply shaped by geography, infrastructure, and institutional context. This underscores the dual character of digital technology in research, on one hand, enriching relevance and reach, on the other, introducing unforeseen challenges and risks. Indeed, as the synthesis of the study demonstrates, with this expansion come concerns, such as the digital divide: persistent disparities in access, skills, and informational equity.⁸⁸ Tahmasebi emphasizes that unequal access not only limits participation in digital research but continues to perpetuate, rather than narrow, social and economic inequalities.⁸⁹ To navigate these challenges, researchers often find they must improvise, adjust their plans, and adapt to technological constraints. This reflects a long-standing insight: despite physical access to digital tools, variations in digital skills and resources perpetuate a “second-level digital divide”. This divide, identified by scholars like Hargittai and Sandvig, shows that differences in digital proficiency and autonomy influence who truly benefits from digital research as the conceptual framework suggests. Spatial conditions also influence which ethical domains, such as data ownership, representation, and access, become most visible or contested. Relational and institutional processes further mediate these concerns, determining how ethical principles are enacted in practice. Such tensions reveal that ethics in DH are not universal but spatially situated, requiring context-sensitive and reflexive approaches that recognize the uneven geographies of digital research and participation.

Discussion Summary

The conceptual framework in this study illustrates how ethical practices in digital humanities research are shaped by spatial, relational, and institutional factors that interact to produce geographically situated ethical tensions. As the digital landscape continues to evolve, the need to explore innovative and ethically sound solutions becomes increasingly urgent. This paper has examined the ethical challenges and opportunities presented by digital humanities research across diverse geographies, contributing to the broader discourse on digital inclusion. In doing so, it emphasizes the importance of targeted strategies that ensure all individuals, regardless of geographical context, can benefit from digital technology. Our analysis underscores that an ethical approach to digital humanities research is essential, particularly to reduce bias and minimize harm. A balanced perspective was adopted to reflect both the novelty and transformative potential of digital technologies, especially in terms of knowledge sharing and their contribution to national development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has shown that the uneven distribution of technological access often exacerbates existing vulnerabilities across countries and communities. Therefore, it calls for a more nuanced, ethically sensitive digital research approach, not imposing a universal model and instead recognizes the importance of diverse geographies in ethical interventions. These interventions must account for socio-economic conditions, cultural norms, local regulatory frameworks, and infrastructural disparities, particularly with regard to consent, access, and representation. There is a need for stakeholders to develop context-sensitive ethics policies that respect diverse geographies, bolster information-sharing laws, and ensure safe, reliable environments for inquiry.

CONCLUSION

The critical analysis of this study demonstrates that ethical practices in digital humanities research are geographically situated, shaped by spatial contexts, relational dynamics, and institutional frameworks that interact to produce distinct ethical tensions. Recognizing these geographies of ethics has significant implications for both policy and education. This suggests that institutional policies and funding bodies should move beyond one-size-fits-all ethics protocols to develop context-sensitive guidelines that acknowledge spatial and cultural diversity in digital humanities research. Ethics training in digital

⁸⁸ Jopling et al., “Postdigital Citizen Science and Humanities: A Theoretical Kaleidoscope.”

⁸⁹ Tahmasebi, “The Digital Divide: A Qualitative Study of Technology Access in Rural Communities”; Uzun, “Digital Humanities: Technology Integrated Social Sciences.”

research curricula should incorporate place-based and relational dimensions of ethical decision-making, encouraging all stakeholders to reflect critically on how digital infrastructures, data practices, and power relations shape research outcomes. With adequate attention and strategic effort guided by insights from the reviewed literature, challenges presented by all the layers shown in a conceptual framework can be managed and brought within reach of resolution.

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