

Reimagining the Humanities in the Digital Age: A Human-Centered Framework for Cultural Innovation and Social Transformation

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Abstract

The humanities continue to play a pivotal role in addressing contemporary societal challenges by fostering cultural understanding, ethical reflection, and interdisciplinary collaboration. This study examines the evolution of human-centered humanities research within the Spanish academic and cultural context, highlighting how universities, research centers, cultural institutions, and digital technologies collectively contribute to knowledge creation and social development. Using a qualitative narrative literature review, the study synthesizes recent scholarly publications on Digital Humanities, cultural heritage preservation, citizen participation, multilingual scholarship, and interdisciplinary research in Spain. The reviewed literature reveals that Spain has developed a robust humanities research ecosystem characterized by strong institutional collaboration, increasing adoption of digital technologies, and sustained investment in preserving both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. The findings further demonstrate that human-centered approaches have expanded the societal relevance of humanities research through enhanced public engagement, open access to cultural resources, and partnerships among academic institutions, government agencies, and local communities. While digital transformation has created new opportunities for research innovation and knowledge dissemination, it also presents challenges related to ethical governance, digital capacity, funding sustainability, and interdisciplinary integration. The study argues that technology should function as a complementary tool that strengthens rather than replaces the interpretative and critical foundations of humanities scholarship. By presenting an integrated overview of Spain's humanities research environment, this paper contributes to the growing discourse on human-centered scholarship. It offers insights for researchers, policymakers, and higher education institutions seeking to strengthen the societal impact of the humanities. The proposed framework also provides a foundation for future comparative research on human-centered humanities ecosystems in other national and international contexts.

Keywords: *Human-centered humanities, Digital humanities, Cultural heritage, Spain, Interdisciplinary research, Social innovation*

Article history:

Received (March 10, 2026), Review Result (May 1, 2026), Accepted (June 5, 2026)

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1. Introduction

The humanities play a fundamental role in understanding human experience, cultural identity, and social development. In the twenty-first century, their scope has expanded beyond interpreting and preserving culture to address contemporary issues such as digital transformation, ethical governance, public engagement, and sustainable development. Increasingly, humanities research adopts a human-centered perspective that emphasizes the needs, values, and lived experiences of individuals and communities while promoting interdisciplinary collaboration across education, technology, and public policy [1].

Advances in digital technologies have significantly transformed humanities research. Digital archives, computational text analysis, artificial intelligence, geographic information systems, and virtual heritage platforms have created new opportunities for preserving cultural resources, analyzing historical data, and improving public access to knowledge [2]. Rather than replacing traditional humanistic inquiry, these technologies complement critical interpretation and enable innovative approaches to cultural and historical scholarship.

Internationally, the humanities are recognized as essential for fostering cultural diversity, democratic participation, and ethical reflection. Contemporary research increasingly supports policy development, cultural preservation, and social innovation by promoting intercultural dialogue and evidence-informed decision-making [3]. Across Europe, interdisciplinary collaboration among humanities scholars, social scientists, and technology specialists has strengthened research addressing migration, multilingualism, digital transformation, and cultural sustainability [4].

Spain offers a particularly significant context for examining human-centered humanities research due to its rich cultural heritage, linguistic diversity, and well-established academic institutions. Universities, research centers, museums, libraries, and archives collectively form a robust research ecosystem that supports scholarship in history, literature, philosophy, archaeology, linguistics, and Digital Humanities. Institutions such as the Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas (CSIC) and leading Spanish universities have played an important role in advancing interdisciplinary research and preserving cultural heritage through digital innovation [5].

The Spanish humanities landscape is also characterized by its commitment to cultural preservation and multilingual scholarship. National initiatives have accelerated the digitization of historical collections, archival records, and museum resources, improving accessibility while encouraging collaboration among academic institutions, cultural organizations, and government agencies [6]. These efforts demonstrate how digital transformation can strengthen cultural preservation without compromising the interpretative foundations of humanities research.

At the same time, the increasing integration of artificial intelligence and data-driven technologies has introduced new ethical and societal challenges. Issues related to algorithmic bias, cultural representation, intellectual property, and responsible use of digital technologies require continued human oversight. Consequently, human-centered humanities research emphasizes that technological innovation should remain guided by ethical principles, cultural diversity, and public benefit [7].

Against this background, this study examines the development of human-centered humanities research within the Spanish academic and cultural environment. It explores how universities, research institutions, cultural organizations, and digital technologies collectively contribute to knowledge creation, cultural preservation, and societal innovation. By synthesizing current scholarship, the study provides an integrated perspective on Spain's

humanities research ecosystem. It discusses its implications for the future of human-centered research in both national and international contexts.

This study pursues the following objectives:

1. To examine the evolution of human-centered approaches in contemporary humanities research.
2. To analyze Spain's humanities research ecosystem, including its universities, research centers, and cultural institutions.
3. To explore the integration of digital technologies into humanities scholarship while maintaining human-centered values.
4. To identify current challenges, societal applications, and future opportunities for humanities research in Spain.

Through this analysis, the paper highlights how Spain's experience demonstrates the value of combining humanistic scholarship, digital innovation, and institutional collaboration to strengthen cultural sustainability and promote socially relevant research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Human-centered humanities research

Recent humanities scholarship has shifted from discipline-centered inquiry toward human-centered and interdisciplinary research, emphasizing cultural inclusion, public engagement, and societal impact. Rather than focusing solely on textual interpretation or historical analysis, contemporary humanities increasingly address social challenges through collaborations with digital technologies, education, cultural institutions, and public policy [8]. This evolution recognizes that humanities research contributes not only to knowledge production but also to democratic participation, ethical decision-making, and sustainable cultural development.

Human-centered research positions individuals and communities at the core of scholarly inquiry. Digital technologies are viewed as tools that expand access to knowledge while preserving the interpretative and critical perspectives that distinguish humanities scholarship. Berry argued that the emerging post-digital humanities paradigm requires computational methods to complement, rather than replace, human interpretation and cultural critique [9].

2.2. Digital humanities in Spain

Spain has become one of Europe's leading contributors to Digital Humanities through sustained collaboration among universities, libraries, archives, museums, and research institutes. A comprehensive mapping study by Toscano, Rabadán, Ros, and González-Blanco identified a mature national ecosystem consisting of numerous research groups, postgraduate programs, digital repositories, and interdisciplinary projects that support humanities research across the country [10].

Spanish Digital Humanities initiatives extend beyond digitization by integrating computational text analysis, geographic information systems, digital archives, and semantic technologies into historical, literary, linguistic, and archaeological research. These developments have significantly improved public accessibility to cultural resources while encouraging collaboration among researchers, educators, and cultural organizations.

2.3. Cultural heritage and citizen participation

Cultural heritage preservation remains one of the strongest research themes within Spanish humanities. Recent studies demonstrate that technologies such as three-dimensional digitization, virtual reality, and interactive digital archives have enhanced documentation, conservation, and public engagement with Spain's rich cultural heritage [11].

Beyond technological innovation, Spanish scholars increasingly advocate participatory research through the concept of citizen humanities. Bocanegra Barbecho found that humanities projects in Spain are progressively adopting collaborative approaches in which citizens contribute to historical documentation, archival transcription, and cultural data enrichment. Such initiatives strengthen public participation while supporting the European Open Science agenda [12].

2.4. Language diversity and knowledge dissemination

Spain's multilingual environment has also influenced contemporary humanities research. Studies examining scholarly communication in Digital Humanities reveal that English continues to dominate academic publishing, potentially limiting the visibility of Spanish-language scholarship. Isasi Velasco and del Rio Riande emphasized the importance of multilingual publishing and citation practices to ensure equitable dissemination of humanities knowledge and to strengthen research produced in Spanish-speaking contexts [13].

This emphasis on linguistic diversity aligns with Spain's broader commitment to preserving regional languages and promoting inclusive knowledge production across diverse cultural communities.

2.5. Humanities, education, and social innovation

Recent Spanish scholarship highlights the humanities' growing contribution to education, cultural policy, and social innovation. Broncano Rodríguez argues that humanities education remains fundamental for cultivating cultural awareness, critical thinking, and democratic values despite increasing technological change. Rather than viewing the humanities as separate from innovation, the study positions them as essential for interpreting cultural meaning and guiding responsible societal development [14].

Similarly, recent bibliometric analyses indicate that Digital Humanities has become increasingly interconnected with information science, linguistics, education, computer science, and cultural studies, reflecting the interdisciplinary character of contemporary humanities research [15].

2.6. Research gap

Although previous studies have significantly advanced understanding of Digital Humanities, cultural heritage, citizen participation, and multilingual scholarship, the literature remains fragmented. Most studies examine individual dimensions such as digital infrastructures, heritage digitization, or public participation independently, with limited integration into a comprehensive human-centered framework. Furthermore, relatively few studies synthesize how Spanish universities, research centers, cultural institutions, and communities collectively contribute to socially impactful humanities research.

Accordingly, this study addresses this gap by proposing an integrated perspective that examines Spain's humanities ecosystem as a collaborative network where academic

institutions, cultural organizations, digital technologies, and communities jointly advance human-centered research for cultural sustainability and social innovation.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study employed a qualitative narrative literature review to examine the evolution of human-centered humanities research within the Spanish academic and cultural context. A narrative review was selected because it enables the integration of diverse scholarly perspectives, conceptual frameworks, and empirical findings from multiple disciplines, including humanities, cultural studies, digital humanities, information science, and social sciences. Unlike a systematic review that focuses on narrowly defined research questions, the narrative approach facilitates a comprehensive understanding of complex and interdisciplinary phenomena.

The review synthesizes current scholarship on human-centered humanities by examining how universities, research institutions, cultural organizations, and digital technologies contribute to cultural preservation, knowledge production, and societal development in Spain.

3.2. Data sources

The literature was collected from internationally recognized academic databases and publisher platforms to ensure the inclusion of high-quality and peer-reviewed studies. The primary sources included:

1. Scopus
2. Web of Science
3. ScienceDirect
4. SpringerLink
5. Taylor & Francis Online
6. SAGE Journals
7. Wiley Online Library
8. Digital Scholarship in the Humanities
9. Revista de Humanidades Digitales
10. Profesional de la Información

To strengthen the Spanish perspective, publications from Spanish universities and research institutions, including the Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas (CSIC), were also considered.

3.3. Literature selection criteria

The literature selection followed predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure relevance and quality.

Inclusion Criteria

- Peer-reviewed journal articles.
- Publications between 2020 and 2026.
- Studies focusing on humanities, digital humanities, cultural heritage, public humanities, or human-centered research.
- Research conducted in Spain or containing substantial discussion of the Spanish humanities ecosystem.

- Articles published in English or Spanish.

Exclusion Criteria

- Conference papers, editorials, book reviews, and dissertations.
- Studies lacking empirical or conceptual relevance.
- Publications focusing exclusively on technical computing without humanities applications.
- Duplicate publications.

3.4. Search strategy

A structured keyword search was conducted using combinations of the following terms:

- "Human-centered humanities"
- "Digital Humanities Spain"
- "Humanities research Spain"
- "Spanish cultural heritage"
- "Citizen humanities"
- "Public humanities"
- "Digital cultural heritage"
- "Humanities and artificial intelligence"
- "Humanities research ecosystem"

Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to refine search results. Reference lists of selected articles were also examined to identify additional relevant publications.

3.5. Data analysis

The selected studies were analyzed using thematic analysis, allowing recurring concepts and research trends to emerge across the literature. Following Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework, the reviewed studies were systematically coded and organized into major themes relevant to the objectives of this paper [16].

The analysis identified five principal themes:

1. Human-centered approaches in humanities research.
2. Development of Digital Humanities in Spain.
3. Universities and research institutions as knowledge ecosystems.
4. Cultural heritage preservation and public engagement.
5. Digital transformation and societal applications.

These themes formed the basis for synthesizing existing knowledge and identifying current research gaps.

3.6. Conceptual framework

The study adopts a human-centered humanities framework, which views humanities research as an interaction among four interconnected components:

- Academic Institutions – universities and research centers that generate knowledge.
- Cultural Heritage – tangible and intangible cultural resources requiring preservation and interpretation.
- Digital Technologies – digital archives, artificial intelligence, visualization tools, and open-access platforms that support humanities research.
- Society – citizens, policymakers, educators, and cultural organizations that apply and benefit from humanities knowledge.

The framework assumes that meaningful humanities research emerges through continuous collaboration among these stakeholders, resulting in greater cultural sustainability, social inclusion, and informed public decision-making.

3.7. Trustworthiness of the study

To enhance the credibility of the review, only peer-reviewed publications from reputable journals were included. The synthesis incorporated studies from multiple disciplines to reduce disciplinary bias and provide a balanced interpretation of current scholarship. Furthermore, the review emphasized recent research while incorporating seminal studies where necessary to establish theoretical continuity.

Although this review focuses primarily on Spain, relevant international literature was incorporated to contextualize Spanish developments within broader global discussions on human-centered humanities research. This comparative perspective strengthens the study's analytical rigor and highlights Spain's contribution to contemporary humanities scholarship.

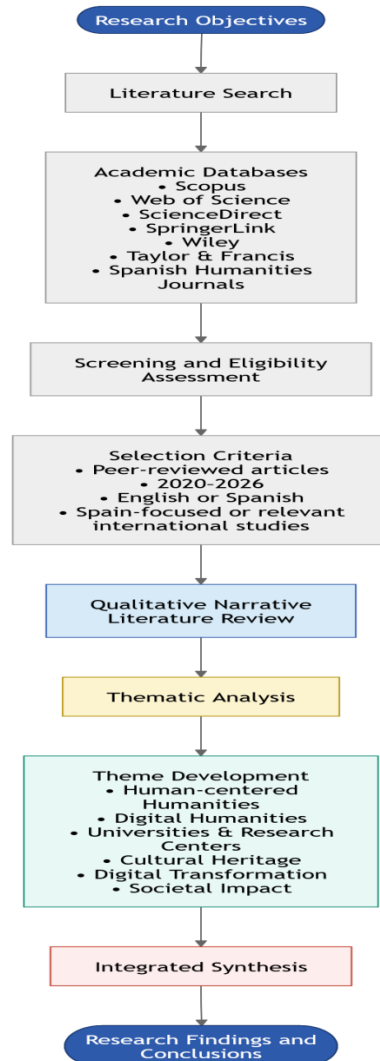


Figure 1. Research methodology framework

Table 1. Summary of the research methodology

Component	Description
Research Design	Qualitative narrative literature review
Time Coverage	2020–2026
Data Sources	Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, Wiley, Taylor & Francis, SAGE, Spanish journals
Language	English and Spanish
Analysis Method	Thematic analysis
Main Output	Human-centered framework for humanities research in Spain

4. Results and findings

The thematic analysis revealed that human-centered humanities research in Spain is characterized by strong institutional collaboration, increasing digital transformation, active cultural preservation initiatives, and growing societal engagement. Five major findings emerged from the reviewed literature.

4.1. A well-established humanities research ecosystem

Spain possesses a mature humanities research ecosystem supported by universities, public research organizations, libraries, museums, archives, and cultural institutions. Universities serve as the primary centers of knowledge production, while research institutes facilitate interdisciplinary collaboration and innovation. National and regional governments further strengthen this ecosystem through investments in cultural heritage preservation, research funding, and digital infrastructure.

This collaborative environment enables humanities research to extend beyond academia and contribute to education, policymaking, tourism, creative industries, and public cultural initiatives.

4.2. Digital transformation has expanded humanities research

Digital technologies have significantly transformed the ways humanities research is conducted, managed, and disseminated. The widespread adoption of digital archives, electronic repositories, geographic information systems, virtual exhibitions, and computational text analysis has improved access to historical and cultural resources while creating new opportunities for interdisciplinary research.

Rather than replacing traditional humanistic inquiry, these technologies function as complementary tools that enhance research efficiency, preserve cultural heritage, and broaden public accessibility.

4.3. Human-centered approaches strengthen cultural engagement

The findings indicate a clear shift toward human-centered research practices that prioritize community participation, inclusivity, and cultural relevance. Humanities research increasingly involves collaboration among researchers, educators, cultural organizations, local governments, and citizens throughout the research process.

This participatory approach promotes greater public ownership of cultural heritage, improves knowledge dissemination, and strengthens relationships between academic institutions and society.

4.4. Cultural heritage remains a national research priority

Spain continues to place considerable emphasis on preserving both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Research activities increasingly integrate historical interpretation with digital preservation methods, allowing museums, archives, libraries, and heritage institutions to improve documentation, conservation, and public engagement.

The findings also indicate growing attention to regional identities, multilingualism, traditional knowledge, and local cultural practices, reflecting Spain's rich cultural diversity and reinforcing the importance of preserving cultural identity for future generations.

4.5. Emerging challenges and future opportunities

Despite substantial progress, several challenges continue to influence the development of humanities research. These include limited funding relative to science and technology disciplines, unequal digital capabilities across institutions, the need for greater interdisciplinary collaboration, and the ethical implications associated with emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence.

At the same time, significant opportunities exist to expand digital humanities initiatives, strengthen international research collaboration, promote open-access cultural resources, and develop innovative educational and community engagement programs. Continued investment in digital infrastructure and human-centered research practices will further enhance the societal impact of humanities scholarship in Spain.

Table 2. Summary of major findings

Theme	Key Findings	Implications
Humanities Research Ecosystem	Strong collaboration among universities, research centers, and cultural institutions	Enhances interdisciplinary knowledge production
Digital Transformation	Increased use of digital archives, AI-assisted analysis, and virtual platforms	Improves accessibility and research efficiency
Human-Centered Research	Greater emphasis on citizen participation and societal engagement	Strengthens public trust and cultural inclusion
Cultural Heritage	Continued priority on preserving tangible and intangible heritage	Supports cultural sustainability and national identity
Future Directions	Opportunities in AI, open science, and international collaboration despite funding and ethical challenges	Expands the long-term impact of humanities research

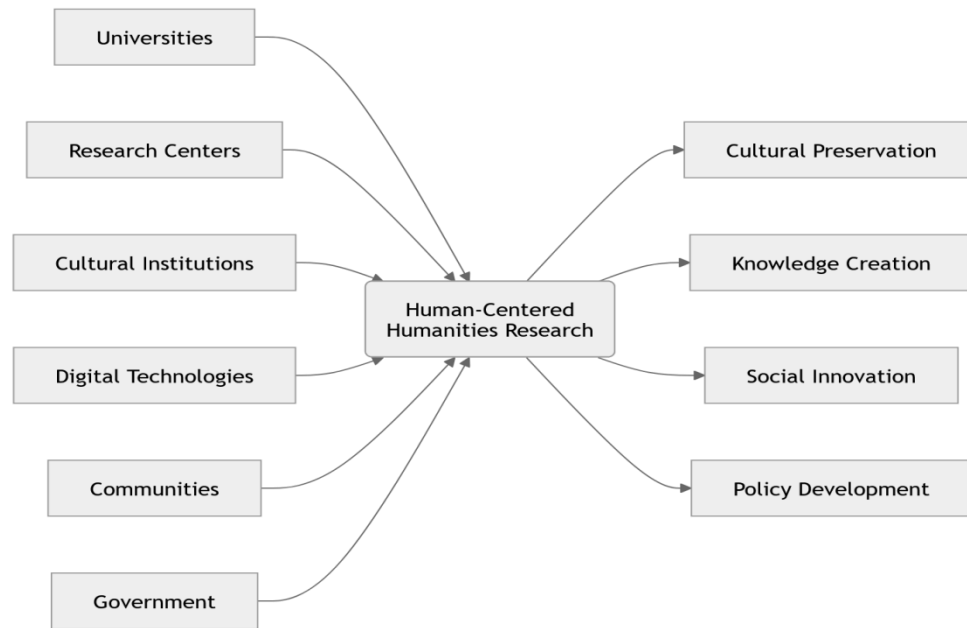


Figure 2. Human-centered humanities research ecosystem in Spain

5. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that the humanities in Spain are undergoing a significant transformation from traditional, discipline-based scholarship toward a more human-centered and interdisciplinary model. This transition reflects broader global trends in which humanities research is increasingly expected to contribute to addressing societal challenges, supporting cultural sustainability, and informing public policy. Rather than functioning solely as a repository of historical and cultural knowledge, the humanities have become an active participant in promoting social innovation, ethical reflection, and inclusive development.

A key observation is that Spain has developed a collaborative humanities ecosystem in which universities, research centers, cultural institutions, government agencies, and local communities work together to produce socially relevant knowledge. This collaborative structure strengthens the connection between academic research and public needs, enabling research outcomes to influence education, heritage conservation, tourism, cultural management, and community development. Such partnerships also facilitate knowledge exchange between researchers and society, reinforcing the public value of humanities scholarship.

Digital transformation has further expanded the scope and accessibility of humanities research. The integration of digital archives, virtual exhibitions, computational analysis, and online repositories has improved the preservation and dissemination of cultural resources while creating new opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration. These technological developments should not be viewed as replacing traditional humanities methodologies but rather as extending researchers' capacity to analyze, interpret, and communicate cultural knowledge more effectively. Consequently, digital technologies serve as enabling tools that support, rather than redefine, the core human-centered principles of the humanities.

The discussion also highlights the importance of balancing technological innovation with ethical and cultural considerations. As artificial intelligence and data-driven technologies

become increasingly integrated into humanities research, questions concerning transparency, cultural representation, intellectual property, and algorithmic bias become more prominent. Addressing these issues requires continued human oversight to ensure that technological advancements remain aligned with cultural values, historical accuracy, and social responsibility. Human-centered humanities research therefore provides an essential framework for evaluating the societal implications of emerging technologies while preserving critical inquiry and cultural diversity.

Spain's rich cultural heritage further positions the country as an important contributor to international humanities research. Its historical archives, multilingual traditions, archaeological resources, museums, and cultural landscapes provide valuable opportunities for developing innovative approaches to heritage preservation and public engagement. By combining traditional scholarship with digital innovation, Spain demonstrates how cultural heritage can be preserved while simultaneously becoming more accessible to researchers, educators, and the wider public. This integrated approach supports lifelong learning, intercultural dialogue, and sustainable cultural development.

Another significant implication concerns the evolving role of universities. Higher education institutions are no longer solely responsible for producing academic knowledge; they increasingly function as innovation hubs that facilitate interdisciplinary collaboration, digital transformation, and community engagement. Through partnerships with cultural organizations, public institutions, and industry, universities contribute to research that generates measurable social, educational, and cultural benefits. This expanded role strengthens the societal relevance of humanities scholarship and enhances its contribution to national development.

Despite these positive developments, several challenges remain. Sustainable funding remains a concern, particularly as humanities disciplines often receive fewer resources than science and technology fields. Differences in digital infrastructure and technical expertise among institutions may also limit the adoption of advanced digital methodologies. Furthermore, increasing interdisciplinary collaboration requires researchers to develop competencies that combine humanistic inquiry with digital literacy, project management, and collaborative research practices. Addressing these challenges will require continued investment in research infrastructure, professional development, and institutional partnerships.

Looking forward, the future of humanities research in Spain will likely be shaped by greater integration of artificial intelligence, open science, multilingual digital resources, and international collaboration. Advances in immersive technologies, semantic knowledge systems, and intelligent digital archives offer opportunities to improve cultural preservation, research accessibility, and public participation. However, these innovations should continue to be guided by human-centered principles that prioritize ethical responsibility, inclusivity, cultural diversity, and public benefit. In this regard, technological progress should be understood as a means of enriching human understanding rather than an end in itself.

Overall, the discussion suggests that Spain provides a valuable model for integrating human-centered scholarship with digital innovation. Its experience demonstrates that strong institutional collaboration, sustained cultural investment, and responsible adoption of technology can collectively enhance the societal impact of humanities research. These lessons may also inform other countries seeking to strengthen the contribution of the humanities to cultural resilience, social cohesion, and sustainable development in an increasingly digital world.

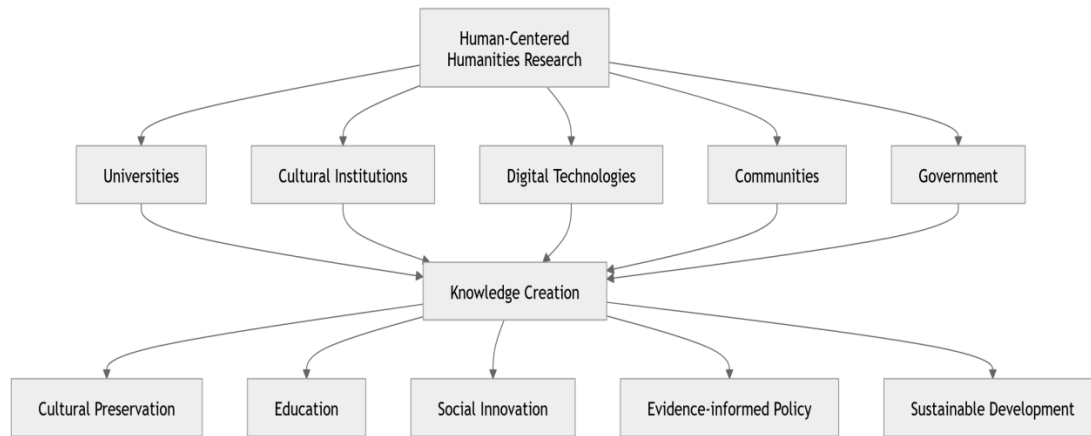


Figure 3. Human-centered humanities framework for sustainable societal development

Figure 3 presents a conceptual framework illustrating how collaboration among academic institutions, cultural organizations, digital technologies, communities, and government contributes to knowledge creation and supports cultural preservation, education, social innovation, policy development, and sustainable societal development.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the evolving landscape of human-centered humanities research within the Spanish academic and cultural context. The review demonstrates that Spain has established a dynamic and collaborative humanities ecosystem where universities, research centers, cultural institutions, government agencies, and local communities collectively contribute to the advancement of knowledge, cultural preservation, and societal development. By integrating traditional humanistic inquiry with digital innovation, Spanish scholarship illustrates how the humanities continue to remain relevant in addressing contemporary cultural, educational, and technological challenges.

The findings indicate that adopting human-centered approaches has expanded the role of the humanities beyond conventional academic boundaries. Digital technologies have enhanced the preservation, accessibility, and dissemination of cultural resources, while participatory research models have strengthened collaboration between scholars and society. These developments have enabled humanities research to support public engagement, heritage conservation, multilingual knowledge preservation, and evidence-informed policymaking. Importantly, technology has emerged as a complementary resource that enriches humanistic scholarship rather than replacing the interpretative and critical perspectives that define the humanities.

The study also highlights the importance of institutional collaboration in sustaining humanities research. Universities continue to play a central role in knowledge creation, but their impact is amplified through partnerships with museums, libraries, archives, cultural organizations, and public institutions. Such collaborations facilitate interdisciplinary research, encourage innovation, and ensure that scholarly outputs generate meaningful cultural and social benefits. Spain's experience demonstrates that a coordinated research ecosystem is essential for maximizing the societal value of humanities scholarship.

Despite these positive developments, several challenges remain. Sustainable funding, unequal digital capacities across institutions, ethical concerns associated with emerging technologies, and the need for stronger interdisciplinary competencies continue to influence the future development of the humanities. Addressing these issues will require long-term investment in digital infrastructure, research capacity building, open-access initiatives, and policies that recognize the strategic importance of humanities research alongside scientific and technological disciplines.

This study contributes to the growing discourse on human-centered humanities by presenting an integrated perspective of Spain's research environment. Rather than examining universities, digital technologies, cultural heritage, or community engagement independently, it demonstrates how these elements function as interconnected components of a comprehensive humanities ecosystem. This integrated perspective may serve as a useful reference for researchers, policymakers, higher education institutions, and cultural organizations seeking to strengthen the societal impact of humanities research in other national contexts.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, this study is based on a narrative review of existing literature and therefore reflects the scope and quality of currently available publications. Second, the analysis focuses primarily on the Spanish context, which may limit the direct applicability of the findings to countries with different cultural, institutional, or policy environments. Finally, the study emphasizes conceptual and institutional developments rather than empirical evaluation of specific humanities projects or programs.

Future research should expand comparative investigations across European and international contexts to identify effective models of human-centered humanities research. Empirical studies examining the social, educational, and cultural impacts of Digital Humanities initiatives would provide valuable evidence for policy and institutional decision-making. In addition, further research is needed to explore the ethical integration of artificial intelligence, multilingual digital scholarship, citizen participation, and emerging immersive technologies within humanities research. Such investigations will contribute to developing more inclusive, sustainable, and socially responsive humanities ecosystems capable of addressing the evolving needs of contemporary society.

In conclusion, the humanities remain indispensable for interpreting human experience, preserving cultural identity, and fostering inclusive societal development. Spain's experience demonstrates that combining human-centered scholarship with responsible digital innovation creates new opportunities for expanding the relevance and impact of humanities research. As societies continue to navigate rapid technological and cultural change, human-centered humanities will remain essential for ensuring that innovation is guided by ethical reflection, cultural diversity, and a deep understanding of the human condition.

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