Online Journal of Communication and Media Technologies, 2026, **16**(1), e202609
e-ISSN: 1986-3497

OPEN ACCESS

Research Article

Paying for privacy? Evaluating consumer willingness to pay for data ownership and ad-free social media experiences on Pinterest

Tyler J. Horan [1*]
0000-0001-8535-5510

[1] University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Amherst, MA, USA
[*] Corresponding author: tjhoran@umass.edu

Citation: Horan, T. J. (2026). Paying for privacy? Evaluating consumer willingness to pay for data ownership and ad-free social media experiences on Pinterest. *Online Journal of Communication and Media Technologies, 16*(1), Article e202609. https://doi.org/10.30935/ojcmt/17876

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 24 Sep 2025
Accepted: 12 Jan 2026

ABSTRACT

As social media platforms increasingly monetize user data through targeted advertising, critical questions arise about privacy rights, digital commodification, and platform governance. This study examines how Pinterest users conceptualize and value privacy, ad-free experiences, and alternative platform ownership models, including subscription-based and cooperative structures. Through mixed methods analysis of 1,000 Pinterest users' responses, we investigate willingness to pay (WTP) for enhanced privacy protections and data sovereignty. Quantitative analysis reveals that revenue-sharing beliefs ($\beta = 1.17$, $p < .001$), privacy concerns ($\beta = 0.29$, $p < .001$), and income ($\beta = 0.27$, $p < .001$) significantly predict WTP, while age shows a negative association ($\beta = -0.45$, $p < .001$). Qualitative findings illuminate the mechanisms underlying these patterns, revealing tensions between users' stated privacy concerns and their behavioral practices, extending scholarship on the privacy paradox. Although respondents demonstrate awareness of their uncompensated digital labor, structural barriers temper enthusiasm for alternative models. These results advance platform studies and digital sociology by illuminating the complex interplay between surveillance capitalism, user agency, and economic constraints. The study concludes by discussing practical implications for platform design, policy development, and future research on digital rights and platform sustainability.

Keywords: platform capitalism, digital labor, platform inequality, privacy paradox, data commodification

INTRODUCTION

The rise of digital platforms has fundamentally reconfigured social relationships and economic structures, raising crucial sociological questions about privacy, digital labor, and emerging forms of inequality (Zuboff, 2019). Using Pinterest as a case study, this research examines privacy perceptions, digital labor awareness, and governance model preferences within platform capitalism, drawing on critical digital sociology (Fuchs, 2014) and feminist perspectives on platform labor (Jarrett, 2014).

This study addresses three interrelated research questions:

(1) How do Pinterest users negotiate the privacy paradox—the tension between privacy concerns and sustained engagement with surveillance-based platforms?

(2) How does Pinterest engagement reflect patterns of digital labor, particularly through an intersectional lens?

(3) What social and structural factors shape users' receptivity to alternative platform governance models?

Through systematic examination of these questions, this research advances sociological understanding of privacy commodification, digital labor relations, and platform capitalism while contributing to debates on technological democratization (Burgess et al., 2018; Mannan & Schneider, 2021).

This research makes four primary contributions. First, it extends scholarship on privacy economics by investigating how socioeconomic status shapes Pinterest users' engagement with the privacy paradox (Acquisti et al., 2016; Kokolakis, 2017). Second, it advances digital labor theory by examining Pinterest's role in reproducing gendered patterns of unpaid platform labor (Duffy, 2017; Jarrett, 2014). Third, it evaluates alternative platform governance models as potential interventions to address structural inequality (Mannan & Schneider, 2021; Scholz, 2016). Fourth, it examines how income and gender stratification shape digital experiences and platform participation (Eubanks, 2018; Noble, 2018).

BACKGROUND

The proliferation of digital platforms has generated substantial academic attention to how users conceptualize privacy, perform digital labor, and respond to emerging monetization models. Social media platforms like Pinterest, operating within what Zuboff (2019) terms "surveillance capitalism," transform user-generated content and behavioral data into profits, effectively positioning users as unpaid digital workers. This section synthesizes critical literature on willingness to pay (WTP) for privacy and digital labor dynamics, situating our analysis within broader sociological frameworks.

Privacy, Inequality, and Platform Economics

Social media platforms' business models fundamentally depend on the commodification of user data. Although users consistently express privacy concerns, empirical research reveals a persistent "privacy paradox"—a significant disconnect between stated privacy preferences and observed behavioral patterns (Norberg et al., 2007). Studies demonstrate that users trade personal data for convenience despite privacy concerns (Acquisti et al., 2016).

Socioeconomic stratification significantly shapes privacy protection capabilities within digital spaces. Empirical evidence suggests that higher-income users more frequently utilize privacy-enhancing technologies and subscribe to ad-free services (Carrascal et al., 2013), while lower-income users often lack the economic means to opt out of data-driven advertising models (Andrejevic, 2014). This dynamic creates what scholars conceptualize as a "privacy divide," in which socioeconomic status determines individuals' ability to protect personal data from corporate surveillance (van Dijck et al., 2018).

Research shows age-based differences, with younger users displaying greater acceptance of data collection in exchange for services (Burgess et al., 2018), while those with higher perceived data control demonstrate increased likelihood of investing in privacy protection (Kokolakis, 2017). The gender dimension operates through systematic exploitation of digital labor, particularly evident in Pinterest's predominantly female user base, where users perform uncompensated content curation reproducing historical patterns of feminized labor devaluation (Duffy, 2017; Jarrett, 2014).

Platform capitalism also intersects with racial and geographic stratification. Marginalized communities experience disproportionate algorithmic discrimination and targeted advertising practices that reinforce systemic inequities (Noble, 2018), while facing restricted alternatives to ad-supported platforms (Eubanks, 2018). This constrained economic agency undermines users' ability to advocate for equitable conditions or enhanced privacy protections (Couldry & Mejias, 2019).

Digital Labor and Alternative Platform Models

Platform economies like Pinterest operate fundamentally through user-generated content as a form of digital labor (Scholz, 2016). This uncompensated labor generates substantial platform value (Fuchs, 2014), prompting theoretical proposals for alternative organizational structures. The digital labor framework extends classical Marxist political economy to contemporary platform capitalism, analyzing how unpaid user activity produces surplus value while obscuring the labor character of these activities.

On Pinterest specifically, users engage in content creation and curation motivated by aspirations of visibility and influencer status—what Duffy (2017) terms "aspirational labor." This unpaid work operates on the promise of future returns, although empirical evidence indicates few users achieve meaningful financial outcomes (Abidin, 2018).

Table 1. Sample demographics compared to Pinterest population

Demographic	Sample (%)	Pinterest population (%)
Female	51.4	60-70
Age 25-44	77.4	-60
Income > $75K	38.4	-40

Note. Pinterest population estimates from Statista (2025) and Pew Research Center

Alternative monetization structures have emerged attempting to reconcile user autonomy with platform viability. Subscription services like YouTube Premium and Twitter Blue offer ad-free experiences, though limited adoption suggests complex dynamics between privacy concerns and monetary valuation (Staff, 2023). Revenue-sharing frameworks offer users proportional compensation for engagement, with decentralized networks like Steemit operationalizing cryptocurrency-based reward systems (Mannan & Schneider, 2021).

Platform cooperativism presents a more fundamental restructuring through collective ownership (Scholz, 2016), though empirical research on sustainability remains limited. Significant barriers include collective action challenges, capital acquisition, and institutional resistance (Mannan & Schneider, 2021). Despite expressing dissatisfaction with extractive platform models, users demonstrate significant resistance to cooperative alternatives, largely due to network effects (Burgess et al., 2018).

METHODS

This study employs a sequential mixed-methods research design to analyze Pinterest users' perspectives on privacy, digital labor, and alternative monetization models, integrating quantitative survey data with qualitative responses.

Sampling and Data Collection

Data collection utilized Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) with stratified sampling to achieve demographic distributions approximating Pinterest's user base. The final sample comprises 1,000 participants, yielding a 95% confidence level with 3.1% margin of error relative to 89.9 million US Pinterest users (Statista, 2025). Quality assurance included attention check items and premium MTurk qualifications. Participation was restricted to US-based respondents to ensure cultural consistency in privacy and monetization attitudes.

Sample Representativeness

To assess sample representativeness, we compared our demographic distributions to known Pinterest user characteristics (**Table 1**). Our sample achieved 51.4% female representation, which deviates from Pinterest's estimated 60-70% female user base but strengthens our analysis of gender effects by providing sufficient male respondents for robust comparison. Our age distribution (77.4% aged 25-44) aligns with Pinterest's millennial-dominant demographics. Income distribution showed 38.4% in higher income brackets (> $75,000), consistent with Pinterest's documented above-average household income levels.

We acknowledge limitations inherent to MTurk recruitment, including potential overrepresentation of tech-savvy, younger, and higher-income individuals (Peer et al., 2017), which may inflate baseline digital literacy and familiarity with subscription services. These characteristics suggest our sample may overestimate WTP compared to the general Pinterest population.

Measures and Instruments

The survey instrument incorporated structured and open-ended items measuring:

(a) WTP for privacy across monetization models (free with ads, $5/month ad-free, $10/month with data ownership),

(b) perceived digital labor including engagement levels, content creation, and curation frequency,

(c) attitudes toward alternative monetization including interest in revenue-sharing and cooperative ownership,

(d) demographic variables including age, gender, income, education, and digital literacy,

(e) privacy concerns and platform trust, and

Table 2. Ordered logistic regression predicting WTP

Variable	β	Standard error	z	p	95% confidence interval
Age	-0.45	0.06	-7.24	< .001	[-0.57, -0.33]
Income	0.27	0.06	4.30	< .001	[0.15, 0.40]
Privacy concern	0.29	0.05	5.42	< .001	[0.19, 0.40]
Gender (female)	-0.02	0.13	-0.12	.904	[-0.27, 0.24]
Revenue-sharing belief	1.17	0.27	4.33	< .001	[0.64, 1.70]
Opt-out behavior	0.38	0.25	1.56	.119	[-0.10, 0.86]

Note. N = 1,000; Pseudo R^2 (McFadden) = .099; Log-likelihood = -908.27

(f) engagement with platform features.

Measurement Approach

Key predictor variables were assessed using single-item measures validated in prior platform research. Privacy concern was measured on a 5-point scale (1 = not at all concerned to 5 = extremely concerned), consistent with established approaches in privacy research demonstrating adequate criterion validity for single-item assessments (Bergkvist & Rossiter, 2007). Revenue-sharing belief and opt-out behavior were assessed with binary (yes/no) items. WTP was operationalized as a categorical choice among three options: free with advertisements, $5/month for ad-free experience, or $10/month for full data ownership.

Data Analysis

The quantitative analytical framework incorporated descriptive statistics, Chi-square tests for categorical relationships, analysis of variance (ANOVA) to examine income effects on WTP, and ordinal logistic regression to assess multiple predictors of payment preferences. Qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis following Riessman's (2008) narrative approach, employing data immersion, preliminary coding, thematic development, and theoretical integration. The mixed-methods design facilitated synthesis between quantitative patterns and qualitative insights.

RESULTS

Quantitative Findings

Analysis of demographic influences on WTP revealed significant relationships with age (χ^2 [8] = 150.91, $p < .001$) and income (χ^2 [8] = 80.30, $p < .001$), but not gender (χ^2 [4] = 6.86, $p = .144$). The ANOVA confirmed significant differences in WTP across income levels ($F = 15.43$, $p < .001$). Nearly half of respondents (46.4%) preferred free access with advertisements, while 38.6% indicated WTP $5/month for an ad-free experience and 15.0% selected the $10/month data ownership option.

The ordered logistic regression model (**Table 2**) identified key predictors of WTP. Revenue-sharing belief emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 1.17$, $p < .001$), indicating that users who believe they deserve compensation for their digital labor showed substantially higher propensity to pay for premium options. Age showed a significant negative association ($\beta = -0.45$, $p < .001$), with older users exhibiting lower WTP. Income demonstrated a positive relationship ($\beta = 0.27$, $p < .001$), and privacy concerns also predicted higher WTP ($\beta = 0.29$, $p < .001$). Gender and opt-out behavior did not demonstrate statistically significant relationships with WTP.

Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of open-ended responses revealed three major themes that illuminate the mechanisms underlying quantitative patterns and reveal tensions in user attitudes toward privacy and platform economics.

Privacy paradox in practice

User responses reflected the privacy paradox—expressing privacy concerns while continuing platform engagement. Users demonstrated awareness of data collection but reported feeling powerless to resist. As one respondent explained: "I review and modify my settings regularly to limit tracking, but I know my data is still being collected." This resignation toward corporate data collection appeared across income levels, with

Table 3. Triangulation of quantitative and qualitative findings

Quantitative	Qualitative support	Integration
Revenue belief → WTP (β = 1.17)	Fairness themes & labor recognition demands	Convergent
Income → WTP (β = 0.27)	Affordability themes & cost sensitivity	Convergent
Privacy → WTP (β = 0.29)	High concern but skepticism about effectiveness	Complementary
46.4% prefer free access	Platform dependency & content accumulation	Complementary

users frequently describing privacy invasion as the "cost of participation" in digital spaces. Another participant noted: "I think they need to be more transparent about how user's data is used and collected. At the same time nothing is free and we as users need to be aware of that."

Privacy-protective behaviors varied with digital literacy. Higher-literacy users reported using browser extensions and creating multiple accounts, while others admitted finding privacy settings "too complicated to navigate." Skepticism about whether paid subscriptions would genuinely enhance privacy was prevalent, with one user noting: "Even if they say they won't collect my data, how can I trust them? They make money from data, not from me."

Digital labor and fairness perceptions

Users recognized that their engagement—pinning, curating, organizing content—generates economic value for Pinterest. The strong quantitative relationship between revenue-sharing beliefs and WTP (β = 1.17) was illuminated by qualitative responses expressing desire for compensation. As one participant stated: "If Pinterest is making money from my content, why shouldn't I get a share?" Another noted: "I spend hours curating content and bringing traffic to the platform. At the very least, frequent users should be rewarded." These responses suggest users who recognize their digital labor as valuable are substantially more willing to invest in alternative platform arrangements.

Despite supporting compensation in principle, respondents expressed skepticism about implementation. Users worried such systems would disproportionately benefit influencers: "A revenue-sharing model sounds great in theory, but I bet only influencers and brands would actually make money from it." One respondent captured the ambivalence: "It would be nice if they paid users, but let's be real—it's never going to happen."

Platform dependency and reform barriers

Network effects and content accumulation emerged as primary barriers to platform migration. One user explained: "Even if I don't like their ads or privacy policies, I have years' worth of saved boards here. Starting over somewhere else would be a hassle." Users recognized that Pinterest's entrenched ecosystem made alternatives impractical regardless of governance preferences.

Attitudes toward alternative governance models reflected mixed curiosity and pessimism. While some expressed interest in cooperative ownership—"A user-owned cooperative model could prioritize user interests over corporate profits"—most doubted feasibility: "A user-owned Pinterest sounds good in theory, but who would actually manage it?" The dominant sentiment was resignation: "Big platforms like Pinterest, Facebook, and Twitter have too much power. No alternative is ever going to replace them."

DISCUSSION

This study examined Pinterest users' WTP for ad-free and privacy-enhanced experiences, integrating quantitative and qualitative findings to understand attitudes toward platform monetization. Results reveal a complex interplay between digital labor consciousness, economic capacity, privacy concerns, and structural platform dependencies.

Synthesis and Triangulation of Findings

The integration of quantitative and qualitative data reveals convergent, complementary, and explanatory patterns (**Table 3**). The most striking finding is the strong relationship between revenue-sharing beliefs and WTP (β = 1.17, $p < .001$). Users who believe they deserve compensation for their digital labor are substantially more likely to pay for premium alternatives—a pattern reinforced by qualitative responses emphasizing

fairness and labor recognition. This convergence suggests that digital labor consciousness may be a more powerful driver of platform reform receptivity than previously recognized.

Higher-income users demonstrated significantly greater WTP ($\beta = 0.27$, $p < .001$), a finding illuminated by qualitative responses emphasizing affordability constraints. As one lower-income respondent noted, they would only consider subscribing "if it was something like $5 a month, maybe." This convergence supports the interpretation that economic capacity constrains translation of preferences into payment behavior.

Privacy concerns significantly predicted WTP ($\beta = 0.29$, $p < .001$), but qualitative responses revealed skepticism about whether subscriptions genuinely enhance protection. Users questioned whether companies honor privacy commitments even in paid models, a trust deficit that may attenuate the privacy-WTP relationship. This complementary pattern suggests that while privacy concern motivates payment consideration, platform distrust moderates actual conversion.

Cross-Platform Comparison

Pinterest's visual discovery model presents distinct monetization challenges compared to other platforms. Unlike video-centric platforms like YouTube and TikTok, where content consumption provides clear value propositions for ad-free experiences, Pinterest's value derives primarily from curation and inspiration—activities users may perceive as their own labor contribution rather than platform-delivered service.

The strong revenue-sharing effect found here contrasts with research on other platforms where monetization potential shows weaker relationships with user behavior. This may reflect Pinterest's positioning as a curation platform where users' labor contributions are particularly visible. Meta's recent subscription experiments have shown limited adoption (Staff, 2023), though direct comparison is difficult given different value propositions. Twitter/X Blue's verification-driven model represents yet another approach that may not generalize to Pinterest's use case.

Compared to TikTok's creator fund model, Pinterest users in our sample expressed stronger expectations of compensation, possibly reflecting Pinterest's positioning as a curation platform where labor investments are more visible than passive consumption. This suggests that platform identity and user self-perception as laborers may shape receptivity to monetization alternatives.

Practical Implications

For platform designers

First, the strong revenue-sharing effect ($\beta = 1.17$) suggests that framing premium offerings around fair compensation may be more effective than privacy-focused messaging alone. Users who recognize their labor as valuable are substantially more receptive to paid alternatives.

Second, tiered subscription models should account for income sensitivity. The significant income-WTP relationship suggests that fixed-price subscriptions may systematically exclude lower-income users, reinforcing the privacy divide. Sliding-scale or income-adjusted pricing could expand access to privacy-enhancing features.

Third, privacy controls require simplified interfaces. Qualitative findings indicate users find settings "too complicated to navigate," suggesting that privacy-by-design approaches reducing user burden may be more effective than opt-out mechanisms.

For policymakers

The income-based privacy divide suggests market solutions alone are insufficient to ensure equitable data protection. Our findings that economic capacity significantly shapes access to privacy options support regulatory interventions establishing baseline privacy protections independent of payment ability.

The strong relationship between labor consciousness and WTP suggests users are receptive to frameworks recognizing their contributions. Policy mechanisms mandating transparency about data monetization or establishing frameworks for user compensation could build on existing user awareness of digital labor dynamics.

For researchers

The significant age-WTP relationship (β = -0.45) warrants investigation across platform types to determine whether generational differences reflect cohort effects, life-stage factors, or platform-specific dynamics. Longitudinal research tracking WTP as users age would clarify these mechanisms.

The strong revenue-sharing effect merits further investigation. Future research should examine whether this relationship holds across platforms with different labor visibility and whether interventions that increase labor consciousness affect WTP.

Limitations

Several limitations warrant consideration. First, reliance on self-reported survey data may introduce social desirability bias, particularly regarding privacy concerns and WTP. Future research should incorporate behavioral experiments assessing whether stated preferences align with actual payment decisions.

Second, while our sample approximated Pinterest's user base on key demographics, MTurk's biases toward younger, tech-savvy, and higher-income individuals may influence findings (Peer et al., 2017). The gender distribution in our sample (51.4% female) differs from Pinterest's female-majority user base (60-70%), which, while strengthening gender comparisons, limits generalizability. Future studies should employ probability sampling from Pinterest's actual user population.

Third, single-item measures for key constructs, while validated in prior research (Bergkvist & Rossiter, 2007), may not capture the full complexity of constructs like privacy concern. Future research should employ multi-item scales where feasible.

Fourth, the US-centric focus limits generalizability to global audiences, where privacy attitudes and economic considerations vary by regulatory framework and cultural context. Cross-national comparisons, particularly including jurisdictions with stronger privacy regulations (e.g., EU under GDPR), would illuminate how regulatory environments shape platform engagement and WTP.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated Pinterest users' WTP for ad-free experiences and data ownership, analyzing the intersection of privacy concerns, digital labor consciousness, and platform dependency. Using a mixed-methods approach, we synthesized quantitative and qualitative findings to provide comprehensive understanding of user attitudes toward alternative monetization models.

Quantitative analysis revealed that revenue-sharing beliefs ($\beta = 1.17$, $p < .001$) emerged as the strongest predictor of WTP, followed by privacy concerns ($\beta = 0.29$, $p < .001$) and income ($\beta = 0.27$, $p < .001$), while age showed a negative association ($\beta = -0.45$, $p < .001$). Gender and opt-out behavior did not significantly influence payment preferences. Qualitative analysis illuminated the mechanisms underlying these patterns, revealing that users who recognize their digital labor as valuable are substantially more receptive to paid alternatives, though structural barriers including platform dependency temper actual conversion.

The triangulation of findings demonstrates that digital labor consciousness may be a more powerful driver of platform reform receptivity than previously recognized. Users who believe they deserve compensation for their contributions show substantially higher WTP for premium alternatives. However, structural barriers—including network effects, content accumulation, and skepticism about implementation—constrain behavioral change even among motivated users.

The implications extend beyond Pinterest to broader debates about platform governance and digital inequality. As social media increasingly mediates social and economic life, the finding that economic capacity shapes access to privacy protection raises fundamental questions about digital rights in stratified societies. The strong revenue-sharing effect suggests that appeals to fairness and labor recognition may be effective strategies for building support for alternative platform models. Future research should examine longitudinal trends in digital labor consciousness, cross-platform comparisons of monetization preferences, and the conditions under which users overcome platform dependency to demand structural change.

Funding: The author received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

Ethics declaration: This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Massachusetts Amherst on 23 August 2024 (Protocol #5884: "Evaluating Consumer Valuation of Privacy and Advertisement Reduction: A Discrete Choice Experiment of Pinterest Users"). All participants provided informed consent prior to completing the survey via Amazon Mechanical Turk. Participation was voluntary, and respondents could withdraw at any time without penalty. Survey responses were collected anonymously; no personally identifiable information was collected or stored. All data were handled confidentially in accordance with the approved IRB protocol.

AI statement: The author declares that no generative AI or AI-assisted technologies were used in the preparation of this manuscript.

Declaration of interest: The author declared no competing interest.

Data availability: Data generated or analyzed during this study are available from the author on request.

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