PedalGate v1.0

Dispatch Disparity, Platform Gaslighting & the Collapse of Courier Trust in Austria’s Gig Economy

RFI-IRFOS | Interdisciplinary Research Facility for Open Sciences Release Date: 2025-07-25 **Location:** Graz, Austria

Executive Summary

Between April 15 and July 25, 2025, a comprehensive 101-day multi-platform investigation was conducted by RFI-IRFOS into systemic inequities, deeply rooted algorithmic dysfunctions, and patterns of rider classification exploitation within the Austrian gig economy. This research concentrated upon three of the nation’s preeminent delivery platforms—Foodora, Volt, and Lieferando—which collectively constitute the preponderant share of the country’s app-mediated logistics labor market. The study was predicated not upon isolated anecdotal accounts but upon a structured, recursive field research methodology, incorporating direct testimonies, meticulous behavioral and dispatch observation, exhaustive escalation documentation, and formal correspondence with designated platform communication representatives. The inquiry revealed a landscape wherein the ostensible promise of flexible employment frequently degenerates into a precarious existence, characterized by a profound and discernible power imbalance, systematically favoring the platform entities over the individual labor providers. This imbalance is observed to manifest through the deliberate obfuscation of operational mechanisms and the strategic manipulation of incentive structures.

The findings delineate a disturbingly consistent pattern: platforms are observed to be optimizing for opacity whilst surreptitiously entrenching asymmetry. Every constituent element of the logistics process—ranging from order assignment to bonus incentive logic, and extending even to the definitional parameters of a "vehicle"—is demonstrably skewed towards non-transparency and misclassification. This deliberate absence of clarity permits platforms to operate with minimal accountability, thereby transferring inherent operational risks and responsibilities onto individual couriers. The resultant economic precarity for riders is not merely an unfortunate byproduct but appears to be an intrinsic outcome of system design. Through the deployment of sophisticated linguistic constructs, selectively disclosed policy stipulations, and automated systems demonstrably lacking in human oversight or effective redress mechanisms, a feedback loop has been meticulously engineered whereby riders are compelled to bear the consequences of systemic flaws, technical anomalies, and intentional design choices. Concurrently, they are systematically denied access to the operational levers that directly impinge upon their remuneration, occupational safety, and long-term economic viability. Riders are concurrently subjected to management by inscrutable code and held culpable for non-conformance to

regulations that are neither overtly visible nor equitably enforced, thereby fostering an environment characterized by profound mistrust, pervasive economic insecurity, and a palpable sense of disempowerment amongst the labor force.

1. Methodology

Timeframe: 2025-04-15 to 2025-07-25 (A 101-day field cycle encompassing active courier routes was executed.) **Platforms Reviewed:** Foodora, Volt, Lieferando (national operations) **Approach:** The methodology encompassed over 40 anonymized rider interviews, conducted with a focus on capturing diverse experiences across varying demographic profiles and operational tenures; semantic analysis of rider dispatch chat logs, scrutinizing patterns of communication, instruction, and conflict resolution; structured photographic documentation of application behavior, including screenshots of dispatch screens, earnings summaries, and policy notifications, meticulously timestamped and geo-referenced; comparative topographic mapping within the urban areas of Graz and Vienna, correlating dispatch patterns with elevation changes and urban infrastructure; meticulous policy tracking, involving the systematic review of publicly available and internally communicated platform guidelines; and comprehensive logs of communications with public relations offices, detailing dates, times, and content of all formal exchanges. The recursive nature of the field research necessitated continuous observation, rigorous hypothesis testing, and the iterative refinement of data collection protocols, thereby facilitating the identification of recurring patterns and subtle algorithmic shifts that might otherwise evade detection by singular, non-iterative surveys. Challenges encountered included the inherent difficulty in procuring transparent data from platform entities due to their proprietary nature, the imperative to preserve the anonymity of interviewed riders to safeguard their livelihoods against potential platform retaliation, and the dynamic characteristic of platform algorithms, which frequently underwent alterations without prior notification, thereby mandating constant adaptation of observational techniques and analytical frameworks.

Supplemental Materials: Supporting documentation included elevation zone mappings, providing granular data on topographical challenges across delivery zones; empirical PIN feature test data, derived from controlled delivery scenarios to assess system efficacy and failure points; simulated bonus system models, constructed to project the impact of various performance metrics on rider earnings; a comprehensive vehicle classification compliance survey, administered to a broader cohort of riders to ascertain the prevalence of misclassification; official AK (Arbeiterkammer) referral confirmations, documenting instances where riders sought legal or advisory assistance; and comparative analyses of internal recruitment materials, contrasting advertised benefits with actual operational realities. These supplementary resources furnished both quantitative and qualitative corroboration, enabling a multifaceted analysis that transcended mere anecdotal evidence to establish the systemic nature of the issues identified and to provide a robust evidentiary basis for the conclusions drawn.

2. Key Findings

2.1 Vehicle Misclassification & Dispatch Fraud

- Platforms are observed to facilitate and normalize the practice of riders self-reporting illegal mopeds as “bikes,” thereby affording them expedited assignment opportunities whilst simultaneously preserving eligibility for remuneration increments typically associated with lighter-vehicle operation. This practice is not merely indicative of an oversight; rather, it appears to be tacitly encouraged, as it enables platforms to sustain the illusion of a voluminous, environmentally conscientious "bike" fleet while simultaneously deriving benefit from the augmented velocity and operational efficiency inherent to motorized conveyances, without incurring the concomitant regulatory burdens or financial outlays associated with a moped-dominant fleet. The economic impetus for riders to engage in such misclassification is demonstrably immense, as it directly correlates with the acquisition of more remunerative assignments, often characterized by shorter completion times and a higher earning potential per hour. This creates a significant market distortion, penalizing honest adherence to regulations.
- Manual cyclists and legitimate pedelec users are demonstrably subjected to structural penalties: they are compelled to accept assignments requiring greater exertion and are frequently dispatched to peripheral or steeply inclined topographical zones without commensurate compensation or the application of dispatch logic exceptions. For a rider operating a standard bicycle, a delivery destined for a locale such as Ruckerlberg in Graz, characterized by significant elevation gain, represents a substantial physical exertion and a considerable temporal commitment that is not adequately reflected in the compensation rendered for the delivery. This engenders an inequitable competitive disadvantage, thereby relegating legitimate cyclists to the periphery of economic viability and disproportionately exposing them to physical strain and reduced hourly earnings.
- No platform has demonstrated the implementation of any enforcement system designed to verify vehicle declarations—specifically, no inspection, flagging mechanism, or technologically assisted audit layer has been instituted. Despite repeated inquiries, platforms failed to furnish any substantive evidence of a robust verification process, which suggests a deliberate informational lacuna or a conscious decision to overlook non-compliance. This absence of oversight perpetuates the fraudulent practice, rendering it an openly acknowledged phenomenon within the courier community, where riders frequently observe and discuss the prevalence of misclassified vehicles.
- This situation cultivates a competitive environment wherein ethical conduct is penalized and illicit activity is rewarded—an inversion of sound platform design principles. The resultant "race to the bottom" incentivizes riders to circumvent or transgress established regulations in order to maintain parity with those exploiting systemic loopholes, thereby eroding trust within the rider collective and undermining the fundamental integrity of the gig economy operational paradigm, leading to a de facto unregulated market.

2.2 Bonus System as Behavioral Punishment

- Although formally presented as “optional,” the bonus system is observed to function coercively: riders are subject to exclusion for minimal deviations, such as the declination of a single protracted, steeply inclined, or end-of-shift assignment. The appellation "optional" is, therefore, a misnomer, as participation in the bonus scheme is frequently indispensable for riders to attain a living wage, particularly during periods of diminished demand or in less densely populated urban sectors. The stipulations governing bonus eligibility are frequently opaque and subject to abrupt alterations without prior notice, thereby impeding riders' capacity to consistently satisfy the requisite criteria and plan their work effectively.
- In urban centers characterized by lower dispatch frequency, such as Graz, the declination of a solitary offer, even if deemed unsafe or excessively demanding, may precipitate a delay in the subsequent assignment opportunity ranging from 45 to 90 minutes. This effectively transforms a theoretical “no penalty” into a tangible decrement in income, as valuable working time is lost. This "soft penalty" effectively compels riders to accept undesirable assignments, irrespective of personal circumstances, safety considerations, or physical capacity, thereby transmuting the purported "flexibility" into a rigid, unyielding operational framework that prioritizes platform efficiency over worker welfare.
- Re-entry into bonus tiers is contingent upon the surmounting of arbitrary performance barriers—e.g., the successful completion of 100 or more consecutive accepted assignments without error—which actively disincentivizes ethical or self-preserving decision-making. Such onerous barriers render it nearly impracticable for riders to recuperate from a singular "error" or a justified declination, thereby entrapping them within lower-paying tiers and perpetuating a cycle of economic duress. Riders are thus compelled to prioritize bonus eligibility over their own welfare, such as taking necessary breaks, or the qualitative standard of service rendered, potentially leading to burnout and reduced service quality.
- Riders operating within economically disadvantaged zones or utilizing slower (legally compliant) vehicles are subjected to compounding opportunity cost penalties. They exhibit a reduced propensity to receive high-value, easily completable assignments, which further exacerbates the difficulty in satisfying the stringent bonus criteria, thereby entrenching economic disparity within the platform's workforce and creating a self-reinforcing cycle of disadvantage.

2.3 Dispatch Algorithm Bias

- Whilst platforms assert the consideration of vehicle type, no systemic differentiation in dispatch mapping or workload allocation has been observed. The algorithms appear to prioritize speed and operational efficiency above all other considerations, without adequately incorporating the physical limitations or legal classifications pertinent to disparate vehicle types. This results in a homogenized dispatch logic that disproportionately burdens non-motorized couriers, leading to an unfair distribution of physically demanding tasks.

- Assignments involving uphill routes are transmitted to riders irrespective of physical feasibility or legal motor assist limitations; orders destined for Ruckerlberg, St. Peter, or Eggenberg highlands were confirmed to have been undertaken on-foot or under considerable strain by cyclists. Such dispatches are not merely challenging but may present considerable hazards, particularly under adverse meteorological conditions or when transporting substantial loads, potentially leading to accidents or injuries. The demonstrable absence of algorithmic intelligence to account for elevation and vehicle type evinces a fundamental disregard for rider safety and well-being, prioritizing delivery speed over human capacity.
- Dispatch behavior consistently favors velocity, irrespective of legal compliance. Consequently, mopeds are observed to receive flatter, more optimally routed workloads despite operating under a "bike" registration status. This establishes a de facto two-tier system wherein misclassified mopeds benefit from preferential routing and enhanced earning potential, whilst legitimate cyclists are relegated to more arduous and less profitable assignments, creating an uneven playing field that undermines fair competition.
- No discernible correlation exists between terrain compensation and dispatch distribution, and no rider has ever been apprised of the manner in which elevation influences assignment allocation. This complete absence of transparency precludes riders from making informed decisions concerning their work shifts or comprehending the precise methodology by which their earnings are computed, thereby further contributing to the perception of being managed by an invisible, inequitable system that operates without clear, justifiable rules.

2.4 PIN Code Feature as Deflection

- The recently introduced PIN system offers no substantive verification or security enhancement. Riders consistently report frequent instances of PIN bypass by customers, or the complete failure of codes to display within the application interface, rendering the system largely ineffectual for its purported objective of ensuring secure delivery. Customers frequently express confusion or impatience with the system, leading to awkward interactions at the point of delivery and delays in the handover process.
- The PIN system is principally utilized as a behavioral lever to reassign responsibility: omitted PIN entry results in delivery disputes for which culpability is ascribed solely to the courier, irrespective of the actual circumstances of the delivery. Rather than preventing fraudulent activity, it establishes a novel point of failure for which the rider is held accountable, even when the customer is at fault or the system itself malfunctions, thereby shifting the burden of proof entirely onto the courier.
- The system provides no protection to riders against order fraud, such as false claims of non-delivery, and offers no recourse when PINs are bypassed or disregarded by customers. Riders are thereby rendered vulnerable to spurious claims of non-delivery, with minimal to no support from the platform to contest such accusations, potentially culminating in financial penalties, account deactivation, or a negative impact on their performance metrics.

- International comparative analyses corroborate the PIN feature's failure to mitigate fraud or enhance accuracy—it merely formalizes an additional point of culpability within the rider workflow, introducing an superfluous layer of complexity and risk for couriers without demonstrable tangible benefits in terms of fraud reduction or enhanced delivery accuracy.

2.5 Platform Silence & Gaslighting

- When directly interrogated with binary, neutral inquiries (e.g., "Is an audit of vehicle declarations conducted?"), platforms consistently either disregarded, deflected, or recontextualized the question. This pattern of non-engagement underscores a deliberate strategy to circumvent direct accountability and to perpetuate informational asymmetry, thereby maintaining a position of unchecked authority.
- Foodora initially engaged in correspondence regarding PedalGate inquiries; however, subsequent to its inability to furnish responses to elementary metrics, such as the number of reported misclassifications or the average bonus attainment rate, the entire email thread was deleted. This unprecedented act of digital expurgation constitutes a stark illustration of the lengths to which platforms may proceed to control prevailing narratives and suppress inconvenient truths, thereby effectively "disappearing" evidence of their non-compliance and avoiding public scrutiny.
- Lieferando consistently failed to acknowledge receipt of inquiry emails, thereby demonstrating a complete absence of transparency and a refusal to engage with legitimate research concerns. This tactic of stonewalling further reinforces the perception that platforms operate beyond the purview of scrutiny, fostering an environment of impunity.
- Volt conceded the initiation of an internal review, yet indefinitely postponed its public response, offering vague assurances devoid of concrete timelines or commitments regarding the resolution of identified issues. This strategy of perpetual deferral serves to dissipate public pressure without substantively addressing the underlying issues, effectively kicking the problem down the road.
- Across all three platforms, riders who escalated issues through official support channels reported receiving circular replies, pre-formulated responses, or instructions to resolve issues that ought to have been managed by the dispatcher or through systemic adjustments. This "gaslighting" phenomenon leaves riders feeling unheard, frustrated, and isolated, thereby undermining their trust in the platform's designated support mechanisms and exacerbating their sense of powerlessness.

3. Case Study: Foodora Austria

In the most exhaustive exchange documented within the study, a public relations representative from Foodora Austria engaged RFI-IRFOS in a formal email dialogue concerning the PedalGate inquiries. While initial communication appeared to indicate an open disposition, the platform's responses consistently failed to satisfy the requisite clarity or technical specificity demanded by the inquiry. For instance, questions regarding the precise methodology for vehicle verification, the algorithmic parameters for bonus qualification, or the data points considered for terrain

compensation were either rephrased as subjective matters of opinion, dismissed with generic institutional phraseology concerning "fairness" and "efficiency" without supporting data, or simply left unaddressed. Despite multiple follow-up communications and concerted attempts to re-clarify the questions posed, the entirety of the email thread was subsequently deleted by Foodora—without formal closure or resolution. This action exemplifies a concerning pattern of internal firewalling: once an inquiry becomes structurally threatening or begins to unveil uncomfortable truths pertaining to platform operations, the default response protocol shifts from active engagement to deliberate erasure, thereby effectively stifling critical discourse and preventing external validation of their operational claims. This behavior suggests a prioritization of reputational management over genuine transparency and problem resolution.

4. Rider Testimonies (Excerpt)

- “The declination of a singular disadvantageous assignment results in exclusion from the bonus scheme. Yet, the pretense of discretionary refusal is maintained.” This sentiment encapsulates the coercive essence of the bonus system, wherein theoretical autonomy is subverted by severe financial repercussions, compelling compliance through economic pressure.
- “My bicycle is legally compliant; my remuneration is not. Daily, motorized scooters are observed to surpass me, yielding double the earnings.” This highlights the direct economic disadvantage experienced by ethically compliant riders attributable to vehicle misclassification, underscoring the unfair competitive landscape.
- “PINs are a travesty. Customers do not solicit them. Dispatch personnel exhibit no concern. Nevertheless, if the comestibles are absent, culpability is ascribed to the courier.” This testimony elucidates the burden of responsibility imposed upon riders by a flawed system designed for the purpose of deflection, shifting accountability away from the platform.
- “An attempt was made to report a rider utilizing a motorcycle classified as a bicycle. Support personnel responded with an animated graphical interchange format depicting safety protocols.” This exemplifies the dismissive and unhelpful nature of platform support when confronted with systemic operational issues, indicating a lack of genuine interest in addressing core problems.
- “The bonus formerly possessed significance. Presently, it functions as a constricting tether, progressively tightened on a weekly basis.” This reflects the escalating pressure and diminishing returns associated with the bonus system, thereby transmuting a putative incentive into a punitive instrument that restricts rider agency.

Dozens of anonymized quotations are compiled within Appendix B, furnishing a comprehensive qualitative dataset that underscores the pervasive nature of these issues and the shared frustrations prevalent amongst the courier collective, providing a human dimension to the systemic problems identified.

5. Demands & Recommendations

Immediate:

- The establishment of a transparent audit and reporting system concerning vehicle declaration versus observed operational behavior is imperative. This measure is crucial for the restoration of equity and the prevention of fraudulent practices. Platforms are mandated to implement a verifiable system, potentially involving periodic physical inspections, GPS data analysis, or technology-assisted verification through image recognition, to ensure that riders are operating the vehicles they formally declare. Such a system would foster a more equitable competitive environment.
- The public dissemination of bonus qualification statistics, disaggregated by rider classification and regional order flow density, is required. Transparency in bonus metrics will empower riders to comprehend the genuine feasibility of attaining bonus incentives, allowing for more informed decision-making regarding work patterns, and will expose any inherent biases within the system that disproportionately affect certain rider groups.
- The implementation of geographically aware dispatch calibration, accounting for terrain and accessibility, is necessary. Algorithms must be updated to intelligently allocate assignments based upon vehicle type and the physical demands inherent to the route, such as elevation changes or road surface conditions, thereby ensuring an equitable distribution of effort and just compensation that reflects the actual labor expended.
- The provision of a rider-activated escalation mechanism for misclassified vehicles, directly linked to dispatcher oversight and a clear disciplinary process, is demanded. Empowering riders to report abuses directly, with an assurance of impartial investigation and subsequent action, will foster a more self-regulating and ethically sound operational environment, reducing the prevalence of unfair competition.
- The immediate implementation of a “Justified Decline” threshold logic (permitting 1–3 penalty-free declinations per session based upon terrain, safety considerations, or excessive distance, etc.) is required. This provision would furnish riders with genuine operational flexibility and protection against punitive measures for declining assignments that are genuinely unfeasible, compromise safety, or are economically disadvantageous, thereby restoring a degree of autonomy.

Long-Term:

- The establishment of a formal rider–platform communication protocol, embedded within the application interface, is recommended. This would constitute a standardized, transparent, and responsive channel for riders to articulate concerns, receive unambiguous responses, and provide feedback, moving beyond current opaque and dismissive support paradigms. This protocol should include clear service level agreements for response times and resolution pathways.
- The establishment of an independent regulatory body, vested with the authority to review algorithmic practices and dispatch logic, is essential. Such an external oversight entity is indispensable for ensuring algorithmic fairness, preventing discriminatory practices, and

holding platforms accountable for their operational impacts upon the workforce. This body should possess the power to audit platform data and enforce compliance.

- The enforcement of compliance with Austrian traffic law within platform classification mechanics is crucial. Platforms must actively collaborate with regulatory authorities to ensure that their internal classification systems align with national traffic legislation, thereby preventing the normalization of illicit vehicle utilization and ensuring public safety.
- The institutional inclusion of rider councils in bonus model design and dispatch equity reform is recommended. Integrating rider perspectives directly into policy and algorithm design processes will ensure that solutions are pragmatic, equitable, and responsive to the lived experiences of couriers, fostering a more collaborative and fair working relationship.
- The imposition of a ban on undeclared motorized vehicle use within “bike” class dispatch queues is necessary. A stringent enforcement policy is required to eliminate the unfair advantage accrued by misclassified motorized vehicles, thereby restoring a level playing field for all riders and ensuring that the environmental and health benefits of genuine cycling are not undermined.

6. Conclusion

PedalGate substantiates what has long been tacitly acknowledged amongst riders at rest stops, vendor entrances, and during dispatch lulls: that the promise of flexibility never constituted a safeguard, and that algorithms, when left unregulated, invariably ossify inequity. That which is presented as freedom transmutes into a snare. That which functions as optimization conceals systemic dismissal. Platforms have substituted transparency with performance metrics and have layered punitive measures within ostensibly rewarding schemes. The findings of this 101-day investigation delineate a perspicuous depiction of an Austrian gig economy model that, notwithstanding its outward assertions of innovation and opportunity, is fundamentally flawed and actively detrimental to its most critical asset: its human labor force, leading to widespread economic precarity and a decline in worker trust.

This report is not merely a remonstrance. It constitutes a ledger of structural detriment and a testament to the resilience of those who endure it. It represents a call for a fundamental re-evaluation of the modalities by which technology is deployed within labor markets, and a demand for ethical design principles that prioritize human well-being over unbridled optimization and profit maximization. The implications extend beyond individual couriers, touching upon broader societal values concerning fair labor practices, algorithmic accountability, and the role of digital platforms in shaping the future of work.

Riders are not petitioning for concessions. They are asserting their entitlement to fairness, transparency, and dignity in their professional endeavors, which are fundamental tenets of equitable employment.

7. Discussion on Platform Engagement and Accountability

The response from Foodora was characterized by a spectrum of non-cooperation, as detailed in Section 2.5 (Platform Silence & Gaslighting) and further exemplified in Section 3 (Case Study: Foodora Austria). This ranged from outright refusal to acknowledge receipt of inquiries, to the provision of evasive and non-substantive replies, and, in one notable instance, the unprecedented act of digital expurgation of an entire email correspondence thread. Such conduct signifies a deliberate strategy to circumvent direct accountability and to perpetuate informational asymmetry, thereby maintaining a position of unchecked authority within the digital labor market. The platforms' collective disinclination to engage with specific, data-driven inquiries regarding their operational mechanics—such as vehicle verification protocols, bonus algorithm parameters, or terrain-based dispatch logic—suggests an unwillingness to subject their proprietary systems to external scrutiny.

The implications of this pervasive non-engagement are profound. Firstly, it strongly suggests a prioritization of opacity over transparency, wherein the platforms prefer to operate without external validation or challenge to their internal processes. Secondly, the consistent refusal to provide substantive responses, particularly to questions concerning fundamental operational metrics, may be interpreted as a tacit acknowledgment of the report's veracity or, at minimum, an inability to counter its findings with verifiable data. This absence of counter-argument from the platforms reinforces the validity of the observations and testimonies presented herein. Consequently, "the record now stands" as the definitive account based solely upon the meticulous research conducted by RFI-IRFOS and the lived experiences of the couriers. This unilateral presentation of findings, necessitated by the platforms' lack of cooperation, underscores the inherent power imbalance within the gig economy and highlights the critical absence of effective accountability mechanisms. It further compels the necessity for external scrutiny and regulatory intervention, as internal resolution pathways have demonstrably proven to be ineffectual. The report, therefore, serves not only as a comprehensive indictment of current practices but also as an urgent call for systemic reform, emphasizing that without the willingness of platforms to engage transparently, the pursuit of equitable labor practices will invariably necessitate robust external oversight.

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