

Long abstract

Recreational night economy in Italian cities

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In recent decades, the night-time economy (NTE) has become a central dimension of urban transformation in Europe. Nightlife-related activities—ranging from hospitality and entertainment to cultural production and creative services—are increasingly recognized as drivers of employment, tourism attractiveness, place branding, and urban regeneration. At the same time, the NTE generates complex governance challenges, particularly in neighborhoods where nightlife clusters spatially, producing tensions between economic vibrancy and residential quality of life. While the institutional, sociological, and cultural dimensions of the night-time economy have been extensively explored, significantly less attention has been devoted to its quantitative structure, supply-side configuration, and contribution to local economic diversification.

This paper addresses this gap by providing a comparative supply-side analysis of the night-time economy across nine major Italian cities: Turin, Milan, Rome, Naples, Bologna, Florence, Palermo, Bari, and Genoa. These cities represent diverse urban trajectories in terms of size, economic specialization, tourism intensity, and historical development paths. Together, they offer a meaningful laboratory for investigating how the NTE is structured within different regional contexts and how it has evolved in response to the COVID-19 shock.

From a regional science perspective, the night-time economy can be interpreted as a temporally differentiated subsystem of the urban service economy. It is not simply an extension of daytime commercial activity but a distinct configuration of firms, labor arrangements, spatial concentration patterns, and consumption behaviors. Night-time-oriented activities often cluster in specific districts—frequently labeled as “Movida” neighborhoods in the Italian context—where a high density of bars, restaurants, clubs, and cultural venues coexist with residential uses. These clusters contribute to urban vitality and creative dynamics, but also generate externalities such as noise, congestion, and conflicts with local residents.

Despite growing policy attention to nightlife governance—including licensing regulations, public order measures, and participatory planning instruments—the economic morphology of the NTE remains underexplored. How many local units compose the night-time economy in large Italian cities? How significant is their contribution in terms of employment? How diversified is the sectoral composition of the NTE across cities with different economic profiles? And how did this segment of the urban economy react to the unprecedented disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic?

To answer these questions, the paper relies on data from the ASIA (Archivio Statistico delle Imprese Attive) database provided by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT). The dataset contains detailed information on active local units, including sectoral classification (ATECO codes), number of employees, and territorial location. Two benchmark years are selected: 2019, representing the pre-pandemic structure of the NTE, and 2022, capturing the immediate post-pandemic configuration following prolonged restrictions on mobility and social interaction.

The empirical strategy involves a multi-step procedure. First, an operational definition of the night-time economy is developed on the supply side. Local units are classified according to (i) the type of service provided (e.g., food and beverage services, entertainment, cultural activities, selected retail segments, creative services), and (ii) their functional relevance to night-time consumption patterns, proxied through sectoral codes typically associated with late opening hours and leisure-oriented demand. In the absence of direct opening-hour data in administrative sources, we constructed a

proxy by combining ATECO sector codes with evidence on typical closing times derived from prior empirical research(e.g., Politecnico di Torino, Muovere la Movidà, 2023), and platform-based opening-hour information(e.g., Google Maps and Places opening-hour information).

Second, descriptive and comparative indicators are constructed to measure the absolute and relative weight of the NTE in each city. These include: the number of NTE-related local units; total employment in NTE sectors; the share of NTE activities within the overall local economy; and measures of sectoral concentration and diversification.

Location quotients and specialization indices are employed to evaluate whether specific neighborhoods display a concentration of night-time-related activities exceeding the overall structure of their host city and, in comparative terms, the average profile of the cities included in the sample.

Third, the paper investigates structural changes between 2019 and 2022, focusing on entry-exit dynamics, shifts in employment levels, and changes in sectoral composition.

Particular attention is devoted to identifying heterogeneous impacts across cities, given their different economic bases, tourism intensity, and university presence. For instance, cities with strong international tourism specializations may exhibit different resilience patterns compared to cities where the night-time economy is more strongly shaped by student demand and residents.

Preliminary evidence suggests substantial cross-city variation in both the scale and composition of the night-time economy. Milan and Rome display the largest absolute number of NTE-related local units and employees, reflecting their metropolitan size and diversified service base. Florence shows a particularly high relative specialization in tourism-related night-time services, while Bologna exhibits a strong student-driven nightlife component. Naples and Palermo demonstrate vibrant but structurally distinct NTE configurations, influenced by informal economies and local consumption patterns. Turin, historically characterized by industrial specialization, confirms its long-term transition toward a service-based and experience-oriented economy. Bari and Genoa present intermediate profiles, combining port-related economic functions with leisure-oriented activities.

The COVID-19 pandemic appears to have a pronounced impact across the sample. Overall, the number of active NTE local units declined between 2019 and 2022, with sharper contractions in sectors heavily dependent on physical proximity, such as nightclubs, live performance venues, and event-related services. Employment losses were particularly concentrated in large metropolitan areas with high exposure to international tourism flows. However, some segments—such as food services with adaptive business models (e.g., takeaway and delivery integration)—showed greater resilience. In certain cities, the relative weight of smaller, flexible establishments increased, suggesting processes of market selection and structural recomposition.

From a regional development standpoint, these findings contribute to three main debates. First, they highlight the role of time-based economic differentiation in shaping urban specialization patterns. The night-time economy represents a distinct layer of urban economic complexity, influencing labor market segmentation, spatial clustering, and sectoral interdependencies. Second, the analysis provides insights into urban resilience, showing how cities with more diversified NTE structures or stronger local demand bases were relatively better positioned to absorb the pandemic shock. Third, the comparative perspective underscores the importance of place-specific governance approaches. Uniform regulatory frameworks may overlook significant structural differences in the scale and composition of nightlife-related activities.

The policy implications could be relevant in the current post-pandemic recovery phase. Local governments are increasingly confronted with the dual objective of revitalizing economic activity while mitigating social conflicts in nightlife-intensive districts. A robust empirical understanding of the supply-side structure of the NTE can support evidence-based decision-making, helping administrations calibrate licensing policies, urban planning instruments, and public safety measures according to the actual economic weight and spatial distribution of night-time activities.

In conclusion, this paper advances the regional science literature by providing a systematic, comparative, and data-driven assessment of the night-time economy across major Italian cities. By moving beyond predominantly qualitative or conflict-oriented approaches, the study foregrounds the economic structure, sectoral composition, and dynamic evolution of NTE-related local units in the pre- and post-pandemic context. The results confirm that the night-time economy constitutes a significant and heterogeneous component of urban economic systems, whose resilience and developmental role depend on broader patterns of diversification, tourism integration, and local demand structures.

Future research may extend this framework to longer time horizons, incorporate spatial micro-data at neighborhood level to better capture clustering dynamics, and explore the interaction between night-time economies and sustainable urban development strategies in European metropolitan regions.