Nocturnality and Resistance: Adaptation and Legitimisation Strategies in Night-Time Street Vending in Chile[1]

Jorge B. Ulloa-Martínez
(University of Valparaíso, Chile)
Jorge.ulloa@uv.cl

This article examines the adaptation and legitimisation strategies employed by street food vendors at night in Chilean urban contexts, emphasising nocturnality as a strategic resource in the re-signification of public space. Using an ethnographic approach, the study analyses three representative cases — La Feria, El Bandejón, and La Plaza — to explore the interactions between informal vendors and urban environments shaped by restrictive policies. The findings reveal that reduced institutional surveillance at night enables the development of solidarity networks and self-regulation among vendors, fostering forms of collective resistance. Furthermore, while formalisation, as observed in the case of La Plaza, offers certain advantages, it also limits the flexibility and adaptability that characterise informal vending. Contributing to the broader debate on the re-signification of public space in contexts of informality and urban control, this study argues that nocturnality creates opportunities for the construction of legitimising territories that challenge daytime regulations and resist the criminalisation of street trade. The article concludes by advocating for further research into the intersections of formality, informality and temporality in shaping contemporary urban life.
Keywords: Nocturnality, street vending, urban informality and formality, legitimisation.

Introduction

Street vending has long been a persistent and dynamic form of informal labour in urban contexts, particularly in Global South countries, where access to formal employment is limited and social protection networks fail to meet the needs of large sectors of the population (Bromley 2000, Crossa 2016, Roever 2016). In this context, street vending represents one of the most visible manifestations of labour informality in Latin America, playing a crucial role in the survival of thousands of workers and their families (Navarrete-Hernández et al. 2023, Paredes-Valverde et al. 2024). However, these practices are subject to state interventions that seek to regulate and, in many cases, suppress their presence through strategies of control and management of public space (Linares 2018, Porras-Santanilla 2024, Spire and Choplin 2018). In Chile, this dynamic is particularly evident in major cities, where informal commerce has been confronted with policies oscillating between restricted tolerance and explicit criminalisation (Matus and Montes 2020, Ulloa-Martínez 2021).

Public space regulation policies tend to focus on the reorganisation of urban land use, prioritising the image of a clean, safe space oriented towards formal consumption (Devlin 2011, Spire and Choplin 2018, te Lintelo et al. 2024). Frequently justified through discourses of citizen security, order and urban development, these policies rely on control mechanisms such as evictions and restrictive regulations aimed at eliminating informal commerce from central

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urban areas (Adama 2021, Middleton 2003). However, such strategies have been criticised for failing to consider the socio-economic realities of workers and for exacerbating tensions between authorities and vulnerable populations (Peláez-Higuera et al. 2023, Recchi 2020). These tensions highlight the broader anthropological debate on the legitimacy of urban informal practices, which has examined how individuals and communities negotiate their presence in the city through everyday interactions, symbolic claims and support networks (Hurtado-Tarazona 2019). The concept of legitimacy in urban settings is shaped not only by state-imposed regulations but also by collective understandings of justice, necessity survival (Pardo and Prato 2019, Porras-Santanilla 2024). In this regard, street vending is not merely an economic practice but a contested terrain where legality, informality and legitimacy are constantly renegotiated.

In response to this punitive control scenario, informal workers develop resistance and adaptation strategies, configuring a form of "micro-management" of urban space that allows them to sustain their economic activities over time (Bayat 2000). A significant aspect of this resistance is nocturnality, which offers a temporary environment with less institutional surveillance, enabling street vendors to operate with greater flexibility (Aramayona and Guarneros-Meza 2024, Chan 2018). In this context, the night emerges as a strategic resource that facilitates the continuity of street work and its social legitimisation, while simultaneously challenging restrictive daytime policies (Seijas and Gelders 2021, Shaw 2015).

Despite the growing body of literature on urban informality and the regulation of public space (see Peimani and Kamalipour 2022), the relationship between street work and nocturnality has been addressed only to a limited extent. Most studies focus on daytime public space occupation, leaving a significant gap in the analysis of night-time dynamics (Peimani and Kamalipour 2022). This daytime focus overlooks the particularities of an environment that, with lower levels of surveillance and regulation, may allow informal workers to engage in more sustainable work practices, less exposed to institutional control. In this context, studies such as those by Aramayona et al. (2024) and Su-Jan et al. (2012) suggest that nocturnality offers an opportunity for informal workers to articulate forms of resistance and adaptability through an alternative use of urban space, coexisting with urban formality. However, in Latin America, and particularly in Chile, there are no studies that explore the everyday dynamics of night-time work in depth, rendering invisible practices and labour dynamics that are essential to the informal economy and the survival of large sectors of the population.

Within this framework, it is necessary to explore the legitimisation practices of street work, particularly those developed in nocturnal contexts. This approach not only helps us understand how workers negotiate their presence in the city but also how the night-time space becomes a stage where the boundary between the formal and the informal, the permitted and the prohibited, is redefined (Aramayona and Guarneros-Meza 2024, Pardue 2023). The use of an ethnographic approach is particularly relevant in such studies, as it captures the subjectivity of actors and the complexity of their practices, highlighting issues such as urban inequalities, the legitimacy of policy and law, employment and informality, marginalisation and social movements (Pardo and Prato 2018).

This study aims to identify and analyse, from an ethnographic perspective, the adaptation mechanisms and legitimisation strategies that shape street food vending during the night in Chilean urban contexts. In particular, the study seeks to contrast the practices of vendors operating without municipal permits with those who have them, exploring how nocturnality fosters the re-signification of public space and street work as a form of resistance against restrictive urban policies. In doing so, the study aims to contribute to the discussion on public space management and urban informality, offering a perspective that highlights the importance of the night in shaping contemporary urban life (Kyba et al. 2020, Linares and Roever 2019, Ulloa-Martínez and Villegas 2024).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this article is constructed around three key concepts: labour informality, public space regulation policies and resistance to these policies through the use of the night as a workspace. These concepts facilitate a detailed analysis of the dynamics between street vending and the punitive strategies of urban management in informal contexts, offering a critical approach to understanding the legitimisation of informal labour within the Chilean context. The literature review focuses on recent and relevant studies that contribute empirical and theoretical evidence on these topics, highlighting local research and comparisons with other urban contexts.

Labour Informality and Street Vending

The concept of labour informality has been central to academic discussions on urban economies in Latin America and is generally defined as the absence of a formal and regulated labour relationship (Chen et al. 2022, ILO 2021). Informality not only entails the lack of employment contracts and social protection but also encompasses economic activities that operate outside the state's regulatory framework, such as street vending (Portes et al. 1989). In the Chilean context, informality has been interpreted as a response to the neoliberal transformations of recent decades, which have increased labour precariousness and the necessity for autonomous survival strategies (Durán and Narbona 2021). Recent studies have highlighted the expansion of informality in Chilean cities, where street vending emerges as a crucial strategy for those unable to secure employment in the formal labour market (Navarrete-Hernández et al. 2023, Ulloa-Martínez and Castillo 2020, Ulloa-Martínez and Villegas 2024).

The literature on street vending has underscored how this phenomenon is not merely an economic strategy but also a form of occupation of urban space that challenges urban planning and control logics (Kiaka et al. 2021, Kurfürst 2023, Moretti 2020). This occupation of public space entails constant interaction with local authorities and the regulations governing the use of these spaces (John-Nsa et al. 2023). In this regard, street vending represents a form of informality that, by being visible and occupying collective space, faces continuous and often punitive regulation (Batréau and Bonnet 2016). The increasing number of ethnographic studies

on the everyday experiences of street workers provides profound insights into their adaptation and resistance practices (Ulloa-Martínez and Villegas 2024, Vargas and Urinboyev 2015).

Public Space Regulation Policies and Punitive Control Strategies

The regulation of public space in urban contexts has historically been characterised by control strategies aimed at organising and disciplining urban use (Spire and Choplin 2018, te Lintelo et al. 2024). In Latin America, and Chile in particular, these policies have assumed punitive forms, reflected in the eviction of street vendors, the implementation of "exclusion zones" and intensified surveillance (Ulloa-Martínez 2021). Such interventions are often justified in terms of maintaining security and order; however, recent studies emphasise that, in practice, they tend to displace and further marginalise the most vulnerable populations (Peláez-Higuera et al. 2023, Recchi 2020).

The punitive approach to public space management has been criticised for its inability to address the structural causes of labour informality, instead favouring the criminalisation of poverty (Brown 2020). In this sense, "zero tolerance" policies and other repressive measures not only seek to eliminate informality from the streets but also to stigmatise those who engage in it (Adama 2020, Swanson 2013), highlighting how control actions focus on suppressing the "visibility" of informality without offering solutions to the issues of precariousness and social exclusion that generate it.

However, the regulation of public space is not temporally homogeneous. Recent research has begun to explore how control strategies become more flexible during certain periods of the day, particularly at night, allowing new forms of space usage by informal workers to emerge (Chan 2018, Hou 2010, Williams 2008). This phenomenon underscores the importance of studying the role of the night in the configuration of urban informality, an aspect historically overlooked in urban policy studies (van Liempt et al. 2015).

The Night as a Space for Resistance and the Legitimisation of Informal Labour

The notion of the night as a distinct space for economic activity has gained relevance in recent literature, particularly in studies on the nocturnal economy and its relationship with informality (Petrilli and Vanolo 2025). During the night, the reduced presence of state authorities and lower surveillance levels allow informal practices, such as street vending, to find a more flexible environment for development (Shaw 2022, Williams 2008). This makes the night a realm of relative autonomy for workers, enabling them to circumvent the restrictions imposed during the day (Ulloa-Martínez and Villegas 2024).

The nocturnal economy has been extensively studied in European and Asian contexts, where its role in revitalising certain urban sectors and contributing to the informal economy has been recognised (Chan 2018, Gwiazdzinski et al. 2018, Nofre and Garcia-Ruiz 2023, Su-Jan et al. 2012). However, in the Latin American context, and particularly in Chile, there is a dearth of studies specifically addressing how the night facilitates the survival of activities such as street vending. For instance, Ulloa-Martínez and Villegas (2024) demonstrate how the night plays a

crucial role in the construction of identities among street workers, attributing significance to their labour practices.

From an ethnographic perspective, the night also provides an opportunity to observe the construction of solidarity networks and mutual support among workers, as well as the social legitimisation of these practices (Galinier et al. 2010, Ulloa-Martínez and Villegas 2024). The legitimisation of street work at night is not solely based on the need for survival but also involves the creation of narratives that affirm the dignity and value of these activities (Matus and Montes 2020). Thus, studies on the nocturnal economy and the resistance of informal workers complicate conventional views on urban informality, highlighting the agency of the actors involved and their capacity to negotiate the boundaries of legality and permissibility (Pardue 2023, Shaw 2017).

This theoretical framework underscores the necessity for a more detailed analysis of how the night becomes a fundamental space for the practice of street vending in Chile, enabling workers to sustain their activities amidst intensified control policies and negotiate the occupation of public space. By integrating nocturnal dynamics into the study of urban informality, this research aims to provide a critical perspective that highlights both resistance strategies and the forms of legitimisation of street work, thereby making a significant contribution to discussions on urban regulation and the informal economy in Latin American contexts.

Methodology

This research is geographically situated in three urban contexts in Chile: Temuco, Maipú and Macul. While these cities differ in size and demographic composition, they share common challenges regarding informal work and the regulation of public space. Temuco, located in the Araucanía region, has a notable presence of indigenous communities and a history of economic precarisation that has intensified informal work. In turn, Maipú and Macul, both part of the Santiago Metropolitan Area, exhibit high levels of commercial activity and urban congestion, where informal vendors navigate between municipal restrictions and everyday survival strategies. Each of these cities has municipal ordinances prohibiting certain types of street vending; however, none have specific regulations on nighttime street vending, allowing these activities to develop in a legally ambiguous space.

The research focuses on three case studies, each representing a food vending unit operated by a family. Two of these vendors operate without municipal permits, while the third has obtained legal authorisation to work in public space. These cases provide contrasting experiences in negotiating legitimacy and adaptation strategies in response to regulatory frameworks.

Following an ethnographic approach, this study employs qualitative methodologies to explore how nighttime conditions shape the strategies and practices of street food vendors. Data collection was conducted between 2022 and 2024 through participant observation, semi-structured interviews and intensive ethnographic accompaniment.

Participant observation was the primary method used to engage with the nightly routines of street food vendors. More than 50 field visits were conducted, covering a range of times from evening to early morning, both on weekdays and weekends. The objective was to document

vendors' interactions with their urban environment, their strategies for navigating reduced institutional surveillance, and the temporal changes in customer activity. Observations included food stall setup, customer interactions and stall closure and dismantling at the end of the night.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with street vendors, municipal officials and other relevant actors to gain insights into their perceptions of informal work, urban governance and the socio-economic significance of nighttime commerce. These interviews aimed to capture both the structural limitations imposed by urban policies and the personal narratives that shape vendors' lived experiences.

In addition to direct observation and interviews, the study incorporated ethnographic accompaniment, a technique that involved prolonged engagement with participants, fostering trust and allowing for a deeper understanding of their practices and decision-making processes. This approach helped mitigate research biases and ensured a more nuanced representation of the social and economic dynamics at play.

Ethical considerations were prioritised throughout the research process. All participants provided verbal consent before being interviewed or observed, and pseudonyms are used in this discussion to protect their identities. By adopting an ethnographic perspective, this study seeks to contribute to a broader understanding of how informal workers negotiate their presence in the city at night, shedding light on the spatial and temporal dimensions of urban informality.

The following section presents the three case studies in detail, offering a closer look at the specific dynamics, challenges and adaptive strategies of each vending unit.

Case Studies: "La Feria", "El Bandejón" and "La Plaza"[2]

This article is based on case studies located in the cities of Temuco, Maipú and Macul in Chile, consisting of street food stalls referred to as "La Feria", "El Bandejón" and "La Plaza", respectively, named after the locations they occupy in the city. These cases are representative of informal labour and street vending, facing various common issues that enabled fieldwork to be conducted around their everyday work dynamics. In the cases of La Feria and El Bandejón, the vending units lack permits to operate in public spaces, allowing for an analysis of everyday work strategies in a context where street work is heavily sanctioned. In contrast, La Plaza operates with permits, offering an alternative perspective on street vending.

La Feria

Rosita and her family have operated a food cart in the well-known Feria Pinto area in Temuco for four years, made possible by pension fund withdrawals during the pandemic. Rosita's husband says: "Thanks to the withdrawals from pension funds, we were able to buy our cart

[2] From now on I will refer to *"La Feria", "El Bandejón"* and *"La Plaza"* to demarcate the case studies, as well as the names of the people have been modified in order not to identify individually those who carry out these tasks because in them work practices are carried out that are sanctioned by existing regulations. In this way I maintain the ethical commitment not to "stigmatize" or mark the people who carry out this work without losing sight of the criteria of scientific rigour.

[…]. We started working on a construction site and then saw the opportunity to come to 'La Feria'. The cart meets all the hygiene requirements set by the ministry […]".

During the day, this space serves as the city's main supply centre, attracting thousands of people from the most working-class sectors of the city, as well as individuals from nearby towns via the rural bus terminal and railway station, which are characteristic of the area (Axt and Ardura 2016). The district also features various supermarkets and other businesses selling goods ranging from construction materials to animal fodder. However, as the day progresses, commercial activity declines. At dusk, when the market and other businesses close, the space becomes occupied by trucks, vans and other transport vehicles. Balmaceda Avenue, its streets, pavements and central reservations transform into a new market — La Feria — this time entirely informal, where vegetables, seasonal fruits, food and other goods are sold late into the night. Within this context, Rosita sets up her food truck, catering to fellow workers and customers who come to stock up at this new market.

El Bandejón

In Maipú, outside a higher education institute near the city's main square, María has been running a street food stall for over ten years, since the institute's inauguration. She operates the stall alongside her husband, who assists with physical labour and money handling. Her stall is not mobile; it consists of a folding table covered with a tablecloth, where she sells sweets, beverages, coffee and tea. She also prepares sopaipillas on-site and uses an industrial oven mounted on a cart to heat pizzas and empanadas, all under a blue canopy providing shelter from the sun, cold, or rain.

Approximately 400 metres away is Plaza de Maipú, the city's foundational site (Cortés-Salinas et al. 2014). This area concentrates a significant amount of commercial activity, financial services, educational and healthcare facilities, as well as local government offices.

Since August 2022, a new ordinance restricting street vending has been enforced following controversies over space occupation and its impact on "security and order". As the mayor stated, "With the approval of this ordinance, we will work to ensure that illegal commerce has no place in Plaza de Maipú or any other sector" (Cooperativa.cl 2022). However, this measure — common in most Chilean cities — has not significantly affected María, as it primarily targets daytime vendors, when inspections and controls are frequent and rigorous. Maipú has been recognised for its successful "eradication of blue canopies" plan, controlling over 300 street vendors occupying public space. According to a study by the National Chamber of Commerce, Services and Tourism (CNC 2022), Maipú ranks as the fourth-largest district for street vendor residence in Greater Santiago, making it one of the region's most densely populated municipalities.

La Plaza

Pepe, a 38-year-old cook, left the hospitality industry — where he had endured shifts of up to 37 consecutive hours — to start his own business in search of better working conditions, higher

income and creative freedom. He no longer wanted someone constantly supervising him. He now operates a food truck selling stone-baked pizzas, churrascos (grilled beef sandwiches), mechadas (Chilean-style stewed meat), completos (Chilean hot dogs), fries and salchipapas (fries with diced sausages). His food truck, a modified trailer hitched to his pickup truck, allows him to be mobile. He parks in different locations, attends private and municipal events and even offers his food via online delivery platforms.

During the day, Pepe operates in Ñuñoa, but every night he relocates to Villa Universidad Católica in Macul, where we first met. Villa Universidad Católica is a neighbourhood situated along the Vespucio motorway, a short distance from Los Presidentes metro station. The houses and local businesses in the area are exposed to the constant roar of vehicles and metro movement, contributing to a dynamic atmosphere defined by continuous noise and pedestrian activity. The motorway, since its construction, has demarcated the boundary with Peñalolén, shaping mobility and potential routes due to the difficulty of crossing, thereby establishing a new form of segregation (Greene and Mora 2005).

Villa Universidad Católica is often described as a "bedroom community," as its residents commute elsewhere for work during the day. However, at night, La Plaza comes to life. Residents use it as a social space, walking their pets, attending musical events and, of course, purchasing food.

The Possibilities of the Night

The night has often been a neglected dimension in urban studies, suffering from what could be termed "nictalopia" — night blindness (van Liempt et al. 2015). However, addressing how the city is produced, experienced and transformed during the night allows us to understand other possible practices within the urban realm: from criminal acts to romantic rendezvous, spaces that change their atmosphere, locations for overnight stays and, of course, nighttime work (Williams 2008).

Street work is an everyday, culturally embedded means of earning a living. In this context, workers are immersed in a range of elements that enable them to assert their right to work freely. Many adopt street work as a way of life, an escape from the precarious conditions of modern labour, and a route to liberation. Moreover, they view it as a cultural practice, identifying themselves as part of a longstanding urban craft passed down through generations. This activity is also intertwined with precariousness, as it allows them to support their families and overcome the poverty that affects them (Ulloa-Martínez and Castillo 2020).

At La Feria, Rosita's food cart — her means of subsistence — has enabled her not only to support her family but also to reconcile raising her three children with her familial responsibilities alongside her husband. Her cart, like the market itself, operates in a context where no one holds the necessary permits to work in public spaces, largely due to onerous bureaucratic processes and the municipality's consistent refusals to issue the required permits. It is precisely in opposition to these exclusionary management practices that they have chosen to operate at night. "At night, nobody bothers us; during the day they issue fines to everyone

occupying the pavement, but here, at night, we can be at ease — we don't need a permit", Rosita tells me, gesturing towards an area where at least a hundred people, using vans, trucks, or tricycles, are selling their products on the street — a phenomenon that would be impossible during the day because of the area's hustle and bustle (field note 2022).

During the night, what might be understood as "tolerated illegalities" (Pita 2012) emerge — informal "arrangements" between municipal agents and other actors, given that the area where they work is removed from the main nocturnal centres of urban activity. César told me:

> "We have to organise ourselves properly to avoid any problems. For example, covering up pickpocketing is not allowed, as these are the kinds of things the municipality could use against us. We also have to take care of the cleaning and leave everything tidy because the next day, this place is completely different – people walk through, buses pass by, and it's the opposite of what it is now. Only in this way can we avoid inspections and issues with the administration… We even discussed all of this informally at some point with the police and the mayor himself."

Yet during the day, this same space becomes one of the most attractive tourist hubs, highlighting the stark differences in the perception of the city between day and night. Feria Pinto, which by day is regarded as one of the city's most fascinating locations, transforms into a space inhabited by people who might be considered "out of place" (Mitchell 2003). In this sense, the "tolerated illegalities" acquire a new meaning: the presence of workers at La Feria injects dynamism and a sense of security into a public space that, otherwise, might exacerbate feelings of insecurity at night.

Feria Pinto not only mobilises but also gives identity to the city, the neighbourhood and the region. It serves as the meeting point between the rural and the urban. In this context — and due to the prohibition against street vending — this nocturnal market has consolidated itself as a wholesale space for the sale of fruits and vegetables. From the sale of self-produced goods to resale and intermediation, it daily mobilises thousands of buyers and passers-by along the avenue. The market corridor itself is a street, with shopping vehicles — the same cars and vans that replenish their stocks — shelves and hundreds of vans and trucks loaded with vegetables, fruits and other produce, alongside the occasional food truck catering to visitors.

The sale of food from carts is generally confined to fast, easily accessible fare such as chips, completos, sopaipillas (fried dough pastries) and churrascos. "It is what people like here", Rosita comments. "When we arrived, people told us exactly what we should sell, because here they have refined tastes […] the coffee couldn't be just any coffee; it had to be Nescafé", reflecting the necessity of understanding the local environment and maintaining a relationship between space and food. The "foodscape" (Arciniegas 2021) weaves together diverse dimensions of food-related work practices in a nocturnal context — from what is sold, to operating hours, social relations with fellow workers and customers, location and negotiation methods, among others. Thus, the night becomes significant, as it is the moment when "certain things are allowed to pass," creating a more permissive social atmosphere, while also allowing

for internal self-regulation among those occupying the street, as they share values associated with both the street and the night (Melbin 1978).

This dynamic is particularly evident in the case of María at El Bandejón, who operates a food stall on the outskirts of a university where other vendors also take advantage of student schedules, both during the day and at night. María states:

> "Here, if you don't cause any trouble, they won't remove you… that's why I don't mingle much with the others working here – otherwise, they'd remove all of us; we have to keep calm."

El Bandejón, situated directly on the pavement, is considered the most dangerous spot: "it is dark" and "young people cause disturbances there", as it is a space where various substances are consumed. Nevertheless, the night offers María the opportunity to earn higher incomes due to the lower likelihood of inspections and controls — especially following the implementation of the latest municipal ordinance, which has fostered what some describe as "informal governance" (Hadfield 2015), promoting new regulatory arrangements among street actors.

In Macul, a particular situation is observed. Pepe managed to obtain the corresponding municipal permits: "it became easier because setting up this cart at night causes fewer negative impacts […]. Who would be bothered by a cart in a square? On the contrary, this cart encourages people to leave their homes". In this case, the night has become the stage upon which he can freely deploy his culinary interests and skills — a freedom that would be far more complex to achieve during the day due to the difficulty of securing permits to operate in other areas. In addition to working at La Plaza at night, Pepe offers catering services at events and food cart markets. For Pepe, working at La Plaza at night means bringing to life a space that during the day merely serves as a thoroughfare, fostering the resocialisation and appropriation of community public space. He told me:

> "During the day, you might see an elderly woman heading to the greengrocer, while everyone else is working [...]. In the afternoon, as the sun sets, people have less appetite; when they leave work, they want to grab something quickly. Working at night is busier – there are twice as many people as in the afternoon. There is a fixed period when people mobilise and want to eat [...]. In this place, during the day, people are at work. There are many areas that are essentially residential. People work elsewhere and then come here to rest. At night, there are groups – there are those from the university bar, young women who come once or twice a week to exercise, calisthenics groups and even groups from medieval reenactments; they are my customers, I love them, they buy a lot from me."

In these contexts, the city transforms, providing spaces for resocialisation and appropriation that during the day would be governed by control and bureaucracy. Thus, the night becomes a crucial setting for the livelihoods of many families, where the coexistence of workers, consumers and various social actors generates a new, parallel urban structure. This

structure challenges formal regulations and reveals the multiple ways of inhabiting and understanding the city. These findings confirm that nocturnality functions as a space of informal regulation, wherein vendors themselves establish mechanisms of self-regulation and negotiation with external actors. This directly addresses the question of how the night legitimises work practices that, during the day, would be subject to greater control and repression.

Street Food and its Narratives of Legitimisation in Sales

Food trucks have emerged as an innovative and creative means of accessing food, transforming not only consumption practices but also the relationships they establish with urban environments (Martin 2014). This phenomenon promotes engagement with the urban experience and, in some cases, constitutes a fast and economical alternative for food access among the poorest urban sectors. Such devices can also be understood as a form of public space appropriation. According to Miewald and McCann (2014), food trucks foster a new way of interacting with space, influenced by various cultural factors that are reflected in the neighbourhoods hosting them.

The case studies from Temuco, Maipú and Macul in Chile illustrate how the "foodscape" (Arciniegas 2021) is defined by an amalgamation of social, economic, political and cultural factors that shape food practices in these urban settings. Public space, with its inherent regulations and negotiations, transforms into the ideal arena for the deployment of these work practices. The public spaces selected in these studies — such as the "La Feria" and "La Plaza" — are highly significant within the cities, representing emblematic places of exchange and sociability, which in turn render them targets for municipal control and regulation. Working in these places means being where people will always find you. If you ask, "Where can I find a hot dog at this hour? you know you can come here," says Rosita. María, on the other hand, has customers who have accompanied her throughout her educational journey: "Here, young people come who enter university, and they always come to smoke a cigarette, buy an empanada, have a drink [...] and they always come, I already know them, many generations of guys have passed by that I know well until they graduate".

During fieldwork, it was observed that street workers have diverse trajectories: some come from family traditions of street work, while others, such as individuals with disabilities, lack access to formal employment (Ulloa-Martínez 2020). In this context, the sale of food becomes a means not only for socialisation but also for the appropriation of public spaces (Milbourne 2021). The sale of fast food is an adaptive strategy that responds to the dynamics of the environment and the needs of the workers. For example, María offers pizzas, sandwiches, sopaipillas and sweets to university students attending evening classes. The fast-paced nature of that period, coupled with the surrounding environment, facilitates quick, easy and economical access to food, thereby promoting on-the-go consumption in public spaces.

Meanwhile, Rosa — who operates a cart in the market — serves street workers and other customers alike. Rosa states:

> "This food is more accessible; people prefer it compared to other options […] we tried selling empanadas, more fully prepared meals like cazuelas (meat casserole), but at night people prefer these other dishes. They don't intend to linger — they just want to grab something quickly and then return to their job or vehicle".

This observation reflects the vendors' capacity for adaptation, as they must remain alert to the time of day, manage their inventory and anticipate when inspections will occur, as well as know whom to approach in the event of difficulties. In contrast to "La Plaza", María remarks that sales must be "on the go and inexpensive", given that students and workers do not have time to linger. Speed and efficiency in transactions thus become crucial in these settings.

In this way, the street food cart emerges as an alternative to food truck strategies, which are also legitimised through narratives from regulators and local authorities, yet often exclude the most vulnerable populations. Consequently, the relationship between vendors and their environment is mediated not only by regulatory restrictions but also by their own narratives of belonging and resistance. These dynamics answer the question of how street workers construct discourses of legitimacy in a context of precarious labour and the absence of specific regulations for nighttime sales.

Discussion

This study aimed to identify and analyse, from an ethnographic perspective, the mechanisms of adaptation and legitimisation strategies that shape the activity of street food vending at night in Chilean urban contexts. The findings drawn from the cases of *La Feria*, *El Bandejón* and *La Plaza* demonstrate that nocturnality functions as a strategic resource, enabling street vendors to reframe the use of public space, establish solidarity networks and negotiate forms of legitimisation in response to restrictive urban policies. One of the central issues emerging from this study is the way in which legitimacy is constructed in the absence of formal recognition. Vendors without municipal permits actively engage in strategies that seek to normalise their presence, whether through adherence to hygiene standards, self-imposed spatial organisation, or informal agreements with local authorities. While these tactics do not provide legal security, they contribute to a form of practical legitimacy that allows vendors to operate with relative stability. This underscores the complexity of legitimacy in urban settings, moving beyond a strictly legalistic perspective to include social and negotiated dimensions (Pardo and Prato 2019). This finding addresses the question of how reduced enforcement during nighttime hours enables the articulation of resistance and adaptation mechanisms, confirming the hypothesis that the night becomes a space of "tolerated illegalities" that reshape urban control dynamics.

At the same time, the contrast between permitted and non-permitted vendors highlights the contradictions of urban governance. On the one hand, those with permits benefit from a degree of institutional endorsement, yet they remain exposed to market fluctuations and municipal restrictions that limit their operations. On the other hand, unpermitted vendors, despite facing a precarious legal status, manage to sustain their activities through flexible and collective strategies that rely on nocturnality as an enabling condition. This tension illustrates

the contested nature of public space, where the boundaries between formality and informality, regulation and evasion are continuously redefined. This finding is particularly relevant for understanding how obtaining permits influences the perception and use of nocturnal public space, underscoring differences in vendors' relationships with the urban environment.

These findings contribute to broader debates in urban anthropology regarding how informal workers negotiate visibility, legitimacy and survival in contemporary cities. The case of nocturnal street vending demonstrates how urban actors engage in micro-level negotiations that challenge the rigid distinctions imposed by regulatory frameworks. By incorporating nocturnality into the analysis of urban informality, this study underscores the need for a more nuanced understanding of how time-specific conditions influence spatial and economic practices in the city.

Ultimately, this study suggests that an anthropological approach to nocturnal street vending offers valuable insights into the interplay between governance, informality and legitimacy. It reveals how informal workers carve out spaces of relative autonomy within an urban landscape that is often hostile to their presence. In doing so, it also raises important questions about the sustainability of restrictive urban policies and the potential for alternative regulatory models that acknowledge the embeddedness of informality within the everyday functioning of the city.

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