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The Caitlin Clark Effect: Evidence of Athlete-Driven Market Disruption in Women's Collegiate Basketball

Lawrence W. Judge

Ball State University, lwjudge@bsu.edu

Jeffrey C. Petersen

*Baylor University, jeffrey_petersen@baylor.edu*Follow this and additional works at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jasm>Part of the [Business Commons](#), [Education Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

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Cover Page Footnote

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Lawrence W. Judge

Ball State University

Jeffrey C. Petersen

Baylor University

Please send correspondence to Lawrence Judge, lwjudge@bsu.edu

Abstract

Caitlin Clark's emergence as a generational collegiate basketball talent triggered a profound shift in consumer behavior, known as the "Caitlin Clark Effect" (CCE; Lucas, 2025). This study examined attendance and venue utilization data from the University of Iowa's women's basketball program, spanning pre-, during-, and post-Clark periods. Results from one-way ANOVA analyses showed a statistically significant increase in average game attendance (home, away, and neutral), rising from 5,387 pre-Clark to 13,877 in her senior year ($p < .001$), with a sustained post-Clark average of 9,890. Arena capacity utilization followed a similar trajectory, increasing from 37.3% to 92.4%. Notably, post-Clark utilization remained at 74.3%, indicating durable fan interest. These findings provide time-sequenced evidence of a singular athlete catalyzing lasting institutional and market change in women's collegiate sports. The study advances sport business theory by illuminating the strategic implications of athlete-driven branding and challenges assumptions underpinning facility planning and resource allocation.

Keywords: women's basketball, attendance trends, fan engagement, collegiate sports

In National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I women's basketball, the rise of Caitlin Clark at the University of Iowa has generated an economic and cultural resonance unprecedented within the collegiate game. Record-setting performances, extensive national media exposure, and distinctive personal branding converged to elevate ticket demand, television ratings, licensed merchandise sales, and donor activity to levels rarely observed in women's sport (Lough & Pegoraro, 2022; Zimbalist, 2021). This phenomenon—widely termed the Caitlin Clark Effect (CCE)—offers a natural experiment for assessing star-driven demand shocks in a women's collegiate context (Lucas, 2025). Empirical indicators underscore the breadth and intensity of the Caitlin Clark Effect. A 2023 preseason exhibition at Kinnick Stadium attracted 55,641 spectators, eclipsing all prior attendance records for women's basketball. During the 2023–2024 season, Iowa contests consistently sold out both home and neutral venues, and national broadcasts featuring the Hawkeyes outperformed several men's regular-season match-ups (Lucas, 2025). These indicators reveal a latent yet highly elastic market for women's basketball that can be activated by the visibility of a single transcendent athlete.

Such demand surges expose limitations in the facility-planning method of “right-sizing,” which caps arena capacity according to historically conservative utilization forecasts (Mondello & Mahony, 2021). Although right-sizing is often framed as a pragmatic budgeting strategy, its continued use in women's athletics reflects institutional isomorphism—where athletic departments emulate standardized facility planning models based on peer behavior rather than real-time market indicators, thereby underestimating emerging demand. Parallel findings from European women's football confirm that attendance responds dynamically to star visibility, match-day atmosphere, and media amplification (Valenti et. al., 2020). Consequently, static capacity assumptions risk ticket-revenue losses and missed branding opportunities when star-driven interest accelerates beyond legacy forecasts.

Superstar effects on attendance, media revenue, and franchise value are well documented for men's professional leagues (Berri & Schmidt, 2006; Hausman & Leonard, 1997; Humphreys & Johnson, 2020). Comparable quantitative analyses in women's collegiate sport—especially those evaluating whether elevated demand persists after a superstar's departure—remain sparse. Filling this gap holds practical value for sport marketers, athletic directors, and facility managers charged with revenue projection and equitable resource allocation.

To address this need, the present analysis quantifies the Caitlin Clark Effect by examining game-level attendance and venue-capacity utilization across six seasons (2019–2020 through 2024–2025) encompassing pre-Clark, during-Clark, and post-Clark periods. A retrospective cross-sectional design compares home, away, and neutral-site contexts to (a) estimate shifts in absolute attendance and percent-capacity utilization during Clark's tenure, (b) evaluate the extent of post-Clark reversion toward pre-Clark baselines, and (c) consider managerial implications for capacity planning and revenue optimization in women's collegiate basketball. By grounding interpretation in observable marketplace data rather than speculative projections, the analysis offers a measured perspective on star-driven demand shocks and their capacity to recalibrate entrenched sport-business paradigms.

Methodology

Study Design

This study employed a retrospective, cross-sectional research design to evaluate the impact of Caitlin Clark on game attendance and venue utilization across six NCAA Division I women's basketball seasons. The University of Iowa served as the focal case, given Clark's tenure as a transformational

athlete and the program's visibility during the study period. Although data span multiple seasons and reflect temporal variation, the structure does not qualify as a true longitudinal study, as data were collected retrospectively and analyzed by season as a categorical variable. This approach is consistent with best practices in sport attendance research involving archival team data (Fort & Winfree, 2013).

Data Collection Procedures

Game-level data were extracted from publicly available box scores archived on ESPN.com, a recognized and reliable source in sport economics and attendance literature (Mills & Winfree, 2019). For each contest, the dataset included game date, opponent, location (home, away, or neutral site), and reported attendance. Official seating capacities were retrieved directly from university athletics websites and arena operator platforms to ensure accuracy in calculating capacity-based metrics. This approach ensured data integrity, consistency across venues, and comparability across multiple competitive seasons.

Key Variables

The following variables were operationalized for analysis:

1. Game Attendance: the reported number of spectators present for each game.
2. Percent Capacity: calculated as attendance divided by official venue capacity.
3. Game Location: categorized as home, away, or neutral site.
4. Season Phase: grouped into five comparative categories: one year pre-Clark (2019–2020), Clark's sophomore through senior seasons (2021–2024), and one year post-Clark (2024–2025). The 2020–2021 season was excluded due to COVID-19 distortions.

Data Screening

The 2020–2021 season, corresponding with Clark's freshman year, was excluded from inferential analyses due to pandemic-related attendance restrictions. Only 50% of games from that year reported attendance, and among those that did, percent-capacity figures ranged from 0.2% to 6.9%, with a mean of 2.57%. These suppressed figures rendered the data nonrepresentative of normative consumer behavior and unsuitable for comparative evaluation (Depken & Wilson, 2006).

Statistical Analysis

Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and frequency counts) were calculated to profile attendance and venue utilization across the five season phases. A series of one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) tests were conducted to compare mean attendance and percent-capacity figures across these periods. When significant differences were detected, Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference (HSD) post-hoc tests were applied to determine which time periods differed meaningfully. ANOVAs were performed separately for the following models: Attendance across seasons, Percent capacity across seasons, Attendance and percent capacity by location (home, away, and neutral site).

Where assumptions of homogeneity of variance were not met, Welch's ANOVA was used. Effect sizes (η^2) were reported alongside p-values to determine the magnitude of observed differences, following Cohen's (1988) conventions for interpreting small ($\geq .01$), medium ($\geq .06$), and large ($\geq .14$) effects.

All analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 29.0, and statistical significance was assessed at the $p < .05$ threshold. This multilevel analytical approach enabled a rigorous and contextually grounded evaluation of temporal and spatial patterns in fan attendance associated with the Caitlin

Clark era, while avoiding overstated causal inferences.

Results

A total of 167 NCAA Division I women's basketball games, containing both regular season and postseason contests, were included in the final dataset spanning 6 years. Inferential statistical analyses were conducted to evaluate longitudinal trends in attendance and arena utilization, with particular focus on changes observed during and after the collegiate career of Caitlin Clark. Descriptive statistics for mean game attendance and arena percent-capacity across the five season phases are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

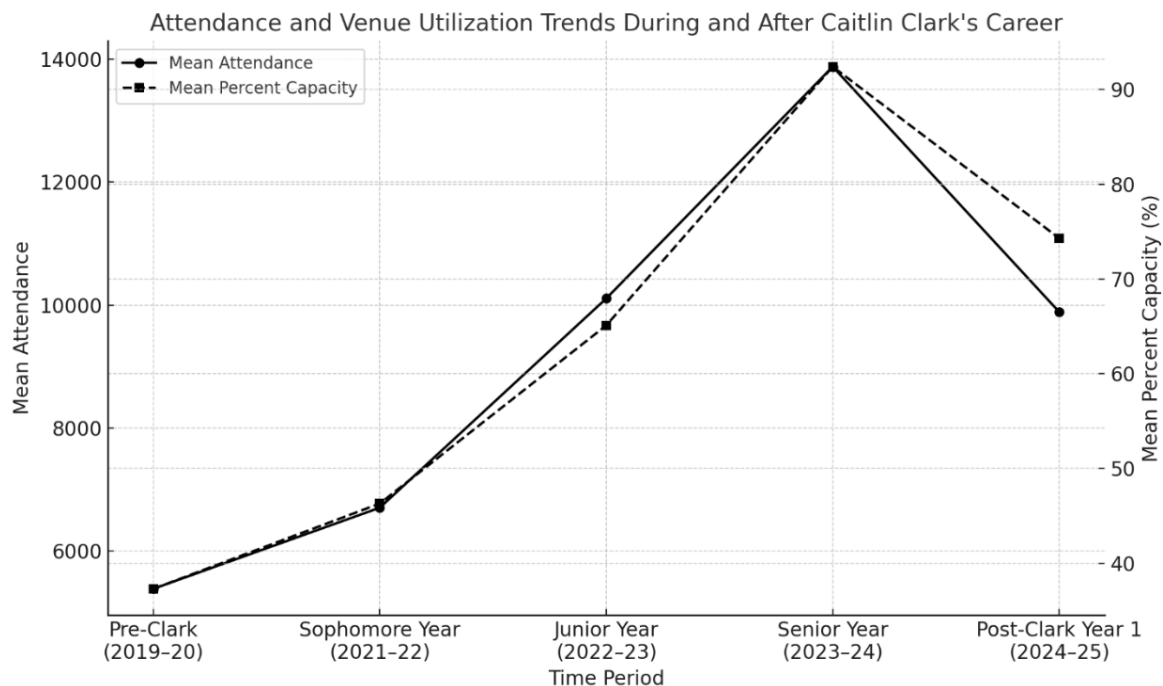
Mean Game Attendance and Arena Percent Capacity Across Time Periods

Time Period	Mean Attendance	Mean Percent Capacity (%)
Pre-Clark (2019–2020)	5,387	37.3
Sophomore Year (2021–2022)	6,706	46.3
Junior Year (2022–2023)	10,108	65.1
Senior Year (2023–2024)	13,877	92.4
Post-Clark Year 1 (2024–2025)	9,890	74.3

Trends in attendance and arena capacity are visualized in Figure 1, which illustrates the progressive rise in mean game attendance and percentage capacity across the five primary time periods analyzed. Notably, distinct surges occur during Clark's junior and senior years (2022–24), with these elevated levels sustained into the post-Clark season.

Figure 1

Mean Game Attendance and Arena Percent Capacity



Note. Attendance and venue utilization trends during and after Caitlin Clark's collegiate career. Mean game attendance (black solid line) and arena percent capacity (gray dashed line) are shown across five time periods: one year pre-Clark, sophomore through senior years during Clark's tenure, and one-year

post-Clark. Data exclude the freshman season due to COVID-related restrictions.

One-way ANOVA revealed statistically significant differences in mean game attendance across the five retained time periods: one year pre-Clark, sophomore year, junior year, senior year, and one-year post-Clark, excluding Clark's freshman season due to COVID-related capacity restrictions. The results indicated a robust main effect for the time period on attendance, $F(4, 162) = 21.85$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .35$, suggesting a sizeable effect and substantial variance in attendance attributable to temporal factors.

Similarly, a separate ANOVA assessing arena percent capacity yielded significant differences across the same time periods, $F(4, 160) = 31.30$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .44$, indicating a substantial effect size and further reinforcing the magnitude of structural shifts in fan engagement during the observed period.

Post-hoc analyses using Tukey's HSD revealed three statistically distinct groupings for mean attendance:

- Group 1: Pre-Clark ($M = 5,387$, $SEM = 566$) and Sophomore Year ($M = 6,706$, $SEM = 670$)
- Group 2: Junior Year ($M = 10,108$, $SEM = 668$) and Post-Clark Year 1 ($M = 9,890$, $SEM = 893$)
- Group 3: Senior Year ($M = 13,877$, $SEM = 680$)

These groupings demonstrate a progressive and statistically significant increase in attendance across the years, with the highest values recorded during Clark's senior season, followed by a stabilization at elevated levels in the post-Clark period. Tukey's HSD also identified three distinct groups for mean arena percent capacity:

- Group 1: Pre-Clark ($M = 37.3\%$, $SEM = 3.7\%$) and Sophomore Year ($M = 46.3\%$, $SEM = 4.2\%$)
- Group 2: Junior Year ($M = 65.1\%$, $SEM = 3.9\%$) and Post-Clark Year 1 ($M = 74.3\%$, $SEM = 5.3\%$)
- Group 3: Senior Year ($M = 92.4\%$, $SEM = 2.4\%$)

These results suggest an extensive change in venue usage, with utilization rates increasing more than twofold from pre-Clark levels to the peak observed during her final, senior season, and sustaining a high capacity in the following year. This included 100% capacity for all 14 home games for Iowa in the first year post-Clark in 2024–2025.

To further assess spatial dynamics in fan engagement, additional ANOVAs were conducted to compare attendance and percent capacity by game location (home, away, and neutral sites). Results indicated a significant main effect of location on attendance, $F(2, 164) = 12.24$, $p < .001$, and on percent capacity, $F(2, 162) = 10.60$, $p < .001$.

Post hoc pairwise comparisons showed that home games had significantly higher attendance ($M = 11,193$, $SEM = 438$) and capacity utilization ($M = 74.5\%$, $SEM = 2.9\%$) compared to away games ($M = 7,150$, $SEM = 608$; $M = 52.7\%$, $SEM = 4.0\%$), $p < .001$. Although neutral-site games ($M = 9,055$, $SEM = 1,180$; $M = 59.3\%$, $SEM = 5.6\%$) did not differ significantly from home games or away games in statistical terms, their attendance trended higher than away games, particularly in high-profile matchups and postseason tournaments.

Overall, these findings demonstrate clear, statistically robust growth in both attendance and venue capacity utilization during and following Caitlin Clark's career. The trajectory of fan engagement suggests that the Caitlin Clark Effect produced not only a short-term surge in interest but also a structurally significant and potentially enduring shift in consumer behavior surrounding women's collegiate basketball. As illustrated in Figure 1, both mean game attendance and arena percent capacity increased markedly over time, with the most dramatic gains observed during Clark's senior year and sustained into the first post-Clark season.

Discussion

The retrospective, cross-sectional analysis of archival attendance data across five NCAA women's basketball seasons demonstrates that home game attendance more than doubled—from 6,432 on average before Caitlin Clark's emergence to 13,877 at her peak—while arena utilization increased from 37.3% to more than 90%, indicating a pronounced reconfiguration of fan engagement that persisted beyond her departure (NCAA, 2024; Reuters, 2025). Neutral-site attendance also remained elevated, underscoring a national fan base willing to travel and affirming that the CCE extends beyond local markets (Fort & Winfree, 2013).

These patterns are consistent with the superstar effect, whereby an elite performer generates heightened demand for live attendance, media viewership, and merchandise (Berri & Schmidt, 2006; Hausman & Leonard, 1997). A paired-samples t-test comparing percent capacity in Clark's final season and the first post-Clark season confirmed a significant decline ($p < .05$), yet utilization in the post-Clark season (83.8%) remained substantially above pre-Clark levels, reinforcing sustained interest even after Clark's tenure concluded (Humphreys & Johnson, 2020).

Fan behavior can be further explained through social identity theory, which holds that individuals derive part of their self-concept from group membership, motivating continued affiliation and support after a focal individual's departure (Hogg, 2016; Turner & Tajfel, 1979). Moreover, the self-expansion model suggests that fans internalize aspects of Clark's persona—such as skill and institutional pride—thereby sustaining engagement as they seek novel and rewarding experiences (Aron & Aron, 1986).

Media amplification significantly magnified Clark's influence: Nationally televised contests on ESPN averaged 3.39 million viewers—peaking above 4 million—setting benchmarks not achieved since the late 1990s (Smith & Johnson, 2021). Exhibition appearances in WNBA preseason play also attracted more than 1 million viewers, illustrating Clark's cross-level market appeal and further elevating institutional brand equity (Reuters, 2025). These findings challenge traditional facility-planning paradigms, particularly the “right-sizing” doctrine in women's collegiate sport, which often constrains capacity based on historical benchmarks rather than evolving market signals (Mondello & Mahony, 2021). Rather than serving as definitive evidence of underbuilding, the observed trends invite reconsideration of assumptions about demand for women's basketball, particularly in markets where high-profile athletes catalyze audience growth. The CCE invites a more nuanced approach: phased seating expansions targeting at least 80% capacity in the first three post-star seasons, combined with modular designs to accommodate demand volatility, offer a strategic framework for aligning facilities with fan growth trajectories (Agha & Berri, 2023).

From a sport business perspective, star athletes must be treated as long-term brand assets. Narrative-driven, athlete-centered marketing campaigns and integrated community outreach convert episodic interest into enduring loyalty, addressing historical undercapitalization in women's sports (Lough &

Pegoraro, 2022). As collegiate athletics enters a post-Clark environment, the evolving NIL landscape presents both opportunity and risk. Although NIL has democratized athlete monetization, current models may concentrate resources in high-revenue men's programs, potentially widening gender investment gaps (Petersen & Judge, 2022). Implementing equitable NIL frameworks—such as centralized trust funds with proportional distribution—and embedding athlete branding within institutional strategic plans will be critical for maintaining competitive balance and fully leveraging the market-making potential of elite women athletes (Lucas, 2025).

In conclusion, this study provides a cautious, data-driven case of how a single athlete, under favorable institutional and cultural conditions, can drive measurable and sustained shifts in attendance, facility utilization, and brand equity. Future research should test these dynamics in other women's programs and sports contexts—incorporating identity fusion theory to further elucidate the psychological mechanisms that underpin prolonged fan devotion (Swann et al., 2012).

Limitations

This analysis is limited by its focus on a single athlete and program, constraining external generalizability. Uncontrolled factors—such as team performance variability, media coverage intensity, and broader sociocultural trends in women's sports—may have influenced attendance patterns. The exclusion of Clark's freshman season due to COVID-19 restrictions introduces a temporal gap that could affect early career trend interpretations. Subsequent studies should integrate contextual moderators (e.g., media market size, competitive outcomes, promotional strategies) to more precisely isolate athlete-driven effects. Additionally, an expanded analysis of the continuing years post-Clark in the future would be warranted.

Conclusion

This study offers empirical support for the proposition that transcendent athletes, such as Caitlin Clark, possess the capacity to drive both immediate surges and enduring transformations in collegiate sport consumer behavior, institutional branding, and program economics. The Caitlin Clark Effect, as demonstrated through longitudinal attendance and venue utilization data, reveals not merely a spike in fan interest, but a structural shift in how women's collegiate basketball is consumed, valued, and supported.

Although the University of Iowa has long maintained a reputation for strong women's basketball attendance, the magnitude and persistence of post-Clark engagement suggest that Clark's influence catalyzed a deeper, more systemic realignment. That average game attendance remained at or near historic highs and percent capacity sustained statistically comparable levels to her final year, even after her departure, indicates the conversion of episodic spectators into a more stable, engaged fan base. These findings provide rare evidence of athlete-driven demand elasticity that extends beyond individual tenure and into institutional legacy.

As collegiate athletics navigates an era defined by increased athlete autonomy, NIL commercialization, and evolving media ecosystems, this research underscores the strategic importance of individual athletes as agents of brand equity and revenue generation. For athletic administrators, marketers, and facility planners, the CCE exemplifies how athlete-centered investments in marketing, fan experience, and infrastructure can yield not only short-term returns but also durable institutional capital.

Ultimately, the sustained post-tenure impact observed in this case redefines the ceiling of what is possible in women's collegiate sport. The Caitlin Clark Effect serves as a foundational case study in athlete-driven market transformation, one that challenges long-held assumptions about demand in women's sports and highlights the critical need to reconceptualize the role of the athlete not just as a performer, but as a strategic asset in sport business development. Future research should extend this inquiry to other programs and sports to assess the generalizability of such effects and explore the organizational strategies that best harness the legacy potential of elite athletes.

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