Does Location Matter? An Econometric Analysis of Stadium Location and Attendance at National Women’s Soccer League Matches

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When it comes to the spatial patterns of professional sport stadiums in the United States, men and women do not compete on a level playing field. While men play in downtown stadiums, most women’s professional teams play in distant suburbs (Schuetz, 2019). The spatial patterns of stadium locations, as Schuetz (2019) indicates, carries both financial and symbolic consequences, especially for women. Financially, being far from downtown may impact attendance. Symbolically, it echoes the same gender stereotypes shaping earlier stages of urban design where men would work downtown and women had to find domestic bliss in the suburbs (Saegert, 1980).

Although there is an extensive literature focused on sport demand (Borland & McDonald, 2003; Feehan, 2006), determinants of match attendance for women’s sport have received little attention and findings from the analysis of men’s leagues cannot be generalized to women’s sport (Valenti et al., 2020). Considering this gap in the literature, the purpose of this study is to examine the impact of stadium locations on attendance in the National Women’s Soccer League (NWSL). This paper was guided by two primary research questions: (RQ1) Is there a relationship between attendance at NWSL matches and stadium distance to the city center?; (RQ2) Does the distance between city center and men’s and women’s professional soccer stadiums have a relationship with attendance at NWSL matches?

In order to examine the research questions, this study develops a model to assess match-level attendance for NWSL games following prior studies of sport demand. Specifically, we draw from previous research focused on women’s professional soccer in Europe (Meier, et al., 2016), as well as consumer interest in attending Major League Soccer matches (e.g., Bradbury, 2020; Wooten, 2018). Within these studies, the empirical models emphasize the importance of a number of factors including facility characteristics (DeSchriver et al., 2016); economic and market factors (Bradbury, 2020); team performance and/or uncertainty of outcome (Sung & Mills, 2018); and the presence of star players (Shapiro et al., 2017).

The data utilized to estimate demand is comprised of 434 matches that were played between 2016 and 2019, with all attendance figures and match related data collected from the NWSL official website. Considering the key variables in relation to the research questions, the results indicate that attendance dropped the further an NWSL stadium was from the city center. Specifically, the coefficients suggest that there is an inverse relationship between attendance at NWSL matches and the distance to the city center, with an estimated 0.5% decline in attendance for each mile further an NWSL stadium was from the city center. Our findings show that some of the perceived differences in demand for women’s soccer may be due to infrastructural inequalities such as stadium locations. Therefore, one way to boost demand and attendance in professional women’s sport, specifically soccer is to move away from suburban stadiums and towards downtown locations. Moreover, this study extends the examination of the economics of women’s professional sport by providing important insight into factors determining fan interest.