Background

Dynamics of a College Town

College towns are more likely to have stores that cater to the offbeat interests and tastes through the stores, music, arts, and other culture (Gumprecht, 2004). They are often home to a plethora of small businesses that try to attract the demographic of young students, including a multitude of small fashion businesses in particular, which face a unique set of advantages and challenges to operate.

With 67 fashion-related businesses operating in the Columbia, Missouri college town, what does it take for a small fashion business to be successful in this unique college town environment?

Purpose:
The purpose of this study was to gain insight on how these small fashion businesses were staying lucrative in this college town through a series of qualitative interviews with five local fashion-related businesses.

Findings

Three key themes emerged from this study:

(A): Consumers want the store to reflect an urban setting that they are lacking from a small town.
- Store owner brings a “bigger city, more urban feel” to customers

(B): Small businesses need to still reflect country hospitality.
- A store manager says, “I like knowing all of my customers by name,” because the familiarity fosters loyalty and spreads business
- Hospitality must also be extended to other local businesses to create mutually beneficial relationships
  - E.g. Sending customers to each other and collaborating together in local events
  - E.g. Carrying different brands from stores with the same product categories

(C): Opportunities exist to make up for low sales seasons (summer and winter) by reaching a different customer base.
- Summer is a viable time to attract college town natives

Implications

Small businesses must take initiative to provide a unique, urban inspired merchandise mix with outstanding customer service in order to be successful. Given the flexibility of small businesses to react to new trends faster than big-box retailers and provide more individualized attention, this is their biggest competitive advantage from the big-box retailers.

Future studies focusing on these small college town businesses’ use of other venues such as website and social media platforms and examining their analytics could reveal key findings regarding the platforms and content that best reaches consumers in a college town.

References