

ON POINTE: DANCERS BATTLE CULTURAL INDIFFERENCE
TOWARD INJURY

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ABSTRACT

On Pointe: Dancers Battle Cultural Indifference Toward Injury is a multimedia project created to raise awareness of injuries among dancers. Through a collection of interviews with experts from various industries, *On Pointe* gains an insider look to the causes of injuries and methods to prevent future injuries. From videos, still photos, and audio recording, the project was promoted through various online and offline platforms. Responses measured through Google Analytics data showed increased interest from readers as a result of this project.

CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement

Forty-two to ninety-seven percent of dancers experience injury at least once in their lifetime (Russell, 2013). This large range is accounted to the varying forms of dance and skill proficiency. Unfortunately, this startling figure is not a surprise to most dancers. Injuries are actually considered part of everyday life for all dancers. Injuries are so frequent among dancers that it is almost expected that one will occur at some point in their career. Individuals who choose dance as a profession struggle the most because of the high demands to perform without receiving the adequate support when injured.

Many major ballet companies in the United States have created medical and therapy services to specifically treat dancers. This medical and therapy services program was able to save one ballet company \$1.2 million in a 5-year period after implementation (Bronner, et al, 2003). Despite this promising example, smaller dance studios and training centers still lack skilled professionals as well as the facilities and equipment to treat injured dancers. There have been countless occasions when dancers would ignore an injury. When dancers seek treatment, they would often receive false recommendations that make injuries worse.

Researchers are working to decrease the injury rate. However, most current research is still limited to the study of classical ballet, isolating many other forms of dances (Russell, 2013). Additionally, this research often only focuses on

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the diagnosis and treatment without taking into account the psychological and cultural aspects in dance. One example of this cultural aspect is the uniform belief that “the show must go on,” regardless of the circumstances. What happens behind the stage is invisible to the audience’s eyes once the curtains are up and the performance is on. Without the audience’s knowledge, there are dancers who fail to make it on stage because of their injuries, or if they are on stage, are dancing through their pain.

Purpose of Project

The dance culture and its indifference to injury are issues that must receive an increased awareness. The purpose of *On Pointe: Dancers Battle Cultural Indifference Toward Injury* project, published in Back of House, is to tell the stories of dancers who have been hurt in the industry. Additionally, medical professionals shared their insights on what can be done to decrease injuries. These stories and insights combined with statistical data will provide a better understanding of the causes of injuries within the dance industry and what can be done to prevent them. While the *On Pointe* project may seem to be directed to dancers and performing arts professionals, the topic is something that is important to anyone who is interested in dance: whether as a hobby or career. Injuries can happen to any individuals of any dance styles and levels (Russell, 2013).

Framework

In late 2013, mandated insurance coverage topped the media’s agenda because of the requirements of the Affordable Care Act of 2010. After health

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insurance coverage began in January 1, 2014, dancers and medical practitioners who were interviewed by *Back of House* shared their stories about the difficulty in getting the proper healthcare prior to the Affordable Care Act. One of these interviewees included Danelle Dickson, a physical therapist specializing in treating dancers based in Washington, D.C. As a practitioner with more than 20 years of experience, Dickson believed improvements are needed among health facilities across the nation as well as for instructors and dance professionals (personal communication, February 8, 2014). The biggest improvement needed is in the increase of awareness and a better understanding of injuries among dancers and how to prevent and treat them properly.

Significance of Project

There is not enough research on finding the best methods of improving working conditions for dancers. Many dancers are unaware of services available for them and what they need to do to avoid injuries. It is also difficult to find healthcare professionals who are trained to treat dancers specifically. Dance companies are either unaware or ignorant of the importance of injury treatments for their dancers. Raising awareness of these key issues opens an opportunity for discussion for many professionals to take action in order to improve the lives of many dancers.

CHAPTER TWO LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This literature review focuses on the current conditions in treating injured dancers according to healthcare providers, dance studios/companies, and individual dancers. Availability is not the issue in healthcare; instead, it is access to these services that is a challenge for most dancers according to physical therapist Danelle Dickson (personal communication, February 8, 2014). Most dancers survive on a freelance-based income, an unpredictable cash flow in a profession that requires a lot of healthcare expenses. Dancers often not only have to pay for their own injury treatments, but also preventative treatments, physical therapy, as well as classes outside of the studio.

Dance companies, studios, and individual dancers are also the key players in the dance industry. This literature review examines the measures and actions that these key players are currently taking to improve the working conditions for dancers. Improvements include dance companies taking action to provide better support for dancers; smaller studios gaining a better understanding of methods in preventing injuries; and individual dancers who can be more aware of their bodies. Moreover, this review also examines the effects of these improvements on how they help dancers both physically and psychologically, as well as how they affect the industry economically.

Review of Literature

The main themes covered in this literature review focus on the perspectives and current conditions among the key players in the dance industry. Each key player offers a unique and significant insight on the current issues. These insights can be analyzed to create a framework that can be used to establish a path needed to help dancers have a better working environment and reduce the number of injuries.

Before the Affordable Care Act was mandated in 2010, many professional dancers relied on health insurance offered by non-profit organizations such as *The Actors Fund* (Brown, 2014). In his review of the Affordable Care Act, Brown highlights the changes to health insurance coverage for individual dancers and small dance studios. With a health insurance card in hand, the next step is to find the right care. One of the challenges in finding the right care is an apparent lack of appreciation of dancers among healthcare providers (Russell, 2013). Dancers need an equal treatment as athletes and most healthcare providers fail to see dancers as equals to athletes.

Dancers, in turn, are often pressured to perform despite their injuries (personal communication, Shu-Chen Cuff, February 18, 2014). The passion for dancing is often likened to an addiction, leading to dancers to have a higher threshold for pain compared to other athletes (personal communication, Jeff Russell, February 7, 2014). Dancers who ignore an injury are becoming increasingly prevalent, especially with the highly competitive nature that comes

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with the culture of dance. Dancers who are afraid to lose their position in a company often choose not to admit they have an injury.

Dance companies can change the mindset to ignore injuries. A responsible director would recognize injured dancers and treat them instead of pushing them through a performance: the principle that is held by founder of *Gin Dance Company*, Shu Chen Cuff (personal communication, February 18, 2014). A strong interpersonal relationship among dancers in a company also ensures sufficient support for each individual dancer who would otherwise feel ruined for losing an important role.

Healthcare providers, individual dancers, companies and studios must work together to build the ideal dance environment where injuries are not ignored, and treatments are readily available. An increased understanding among these parties will create a better system that can benefit a dancer to be healthier. A collection of healthier and happier dancers can lead to a more profitable dance company that will eventually lead to better employment in the competitive job market.

Summary

Recognizing injuries as a significant part of a dancer's life is central to a successful dance company. A closer review of the many aspects that make up the dance environment reveals key issues that can be solved systematically between industries. Results from this review can provide a thorough background and act as a guideline in creating a movement to better the health and lives of dancers across the nation and across the globe.

CHAPTER THREE METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

Project Development

The topic of healthcare has topped the media's agenda since the passing of the Affordable Care Act on March 23, 2010. In 2011, approximately half of the U.S. population does not have employment-based health insurance coverage (Janicki, 2013). Included in this figure are performing artists who struggle to get basic healthcare coverage. Most artists work in small companies or freelance, and do not receive healthcare coverage from their employer (Brown, 2014).

During the first development of the project, the focus of the story is mainly the healthcare coverage of performance artists. According to stage manager Kristen Bishel, some are lucky to have obtained healthcare coverage from either their company or through non-profit organizations such as the *Actors Fund* (personal communication, October 18, 2013). Despite the availability of healthcare, performing artists continue to struggle with staying healthy in their profession. The main cause to this challenge in staying healthy is usually work conditions and the lack of care of performing artists who chose their art as a career.

Repetitive routines combined with long training hours proved to be the biggest challenge for performing artists, and its consequences are felt the most by dancers (Russell, 2013). This observation resulted in the project focusing on the main struggle that dancers face throughout their career: injuries. Upon the project's initiation, individuals in the performing arts often mention the importance

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of this project and the continuous need to raise awareness among professional as well as hobbyist dancers.

Project Execution

The purpose of *On Pointe* project is to raise attention to the individuals who have a pivotal relationship with injuries in dance. An academic researcher was interviewed for his insight in the current state of injury treatments and awareness in dance. Added to this research information are two dancers who are now medical professionals who shared not only how dancers are treated, but also the many challenges faced by the industry in treating the injured dancer. Lastly, individuals who are directly affected by injuries in the dance studio are interviewed. These interviewees include dance instructors, company owners, and professional dancers.

Use of video and photography became necessary for this project not only to visualize the movements of dancers but also to get a personal understanding from the individuals affected by injuries. Two videos were produced: one filmed in a dance company and another in a treatment facility. A series of photographs were produced to show the movements that dancers go through inside the dance studio. Another photography series was made to show proper postures in dance to prevent the occurrence of injuries.

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Figure 1: Screenshot of “The Injured Dancer” video



Figure 2:

Screenshot of interview with Danelle Dickson

Additional multimedia elements included in this project are an audio interview with the academic researcher as well as a *Pinterest* board showcasing different images and *infographics* on dance injuries. Lastly, the entire project is combined with the use of written article, which became the guiding element for the reader. This combination of multimedia provided a way for the reader to experience the article in various ways, allowing for a full immersion in the topic.

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Figure 3: Audio interview with Dr. Jeff Russell

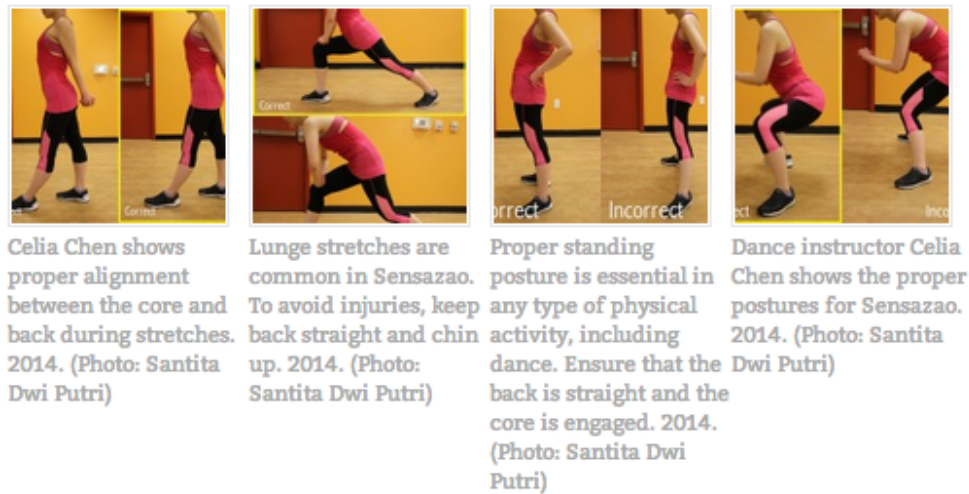


Figure 4: Series of proper posture photographs

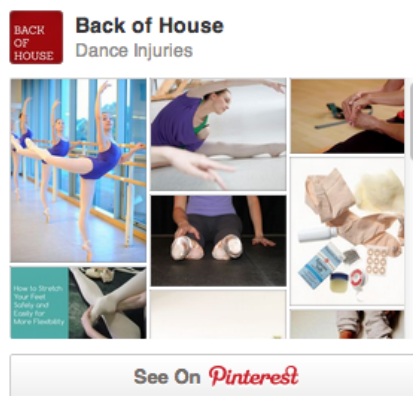


Figure 5: “Dance Injuries” Pinterest widget

Project Distribution

Since the main purpose of the project is to raise awareness of the topic of injuries among dancers, a strategy focused on engagement is fundamental. The first element to engagement is social media distribution. The project was heavily promoted on *Twitter*, *Facebook*, and *Google+*. Organizations and individuals mentioned in the project are encouraged to share the project with their followers to increase engagement with the content. The project is also promoted on other related blogs opening to possible collaborations with other writers who are interested in the topic of dance injuries.

To gain a broader audience beyond the social media range, the *On Pointe* will be submitted to several media publications including the *Washington City Paper*, *CNN iReport*, *Dance Magazine Online*, and *4Dancers*. The nature of these publications has been analyzed and was found to be the best fit for the project. Non-niche publications such as the *Washington City Paper* and *CNN iReport* allows for not only professional dancers to be exposed to the topic, but also dance enthusiasts and especially parents of young dancers. On the other hand, niche publications such as *Dance Magazine Online* and *4Dancers* will be a good entryway for the project to be exposed to those who are already in the dance industry.

Finally, *On Pointe* will be getting its offline promotion through in-person promotional efforts. One way of executing this is by distributing promotional cards displaying the project's information in different performing arts venues around the Washington, D.C. metro area. Outside the venues, participation in events will be

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useful in increasing brand awareness. These events include networking events with other individuals and organizations that focus their work in performing arts as well as arts festivals.

Project Promotion

Promotional efforts begin at the initiation of *On Pointe* project. Discussions on dance injuries started on social media, involving dancers who are already having conversations around the topic. This early promotion allows interviewees to be involved in the social engagement before the project is finalized. Social media promotion was distributed on *Twitter*, *Facebook*, and *Google+*.

Following the promotion of the thesis multimedia project are announcements made post publication date. The purpose is for followers and readers to cross promote as well as continue to expand the conversations revolving around dance injuries and healthcare among performing artists. A *Storify* compilation of reader's response will be collected one month after the publication date.

Project Results

Since the launch of the project in April 12, 2013, the website has received 1,375 total visits. 88% of these visitors are based in the U.S. with the majority from Washington, D.C. metropolitan area (including cities in Maryland and Virginia) as well as from California. One third of the visitors (33.5%) are between the ages of 25 and 34. The majority of the visits are new, accounting for 79% of the total visits. The average length of stay on the website is approximately one minute.

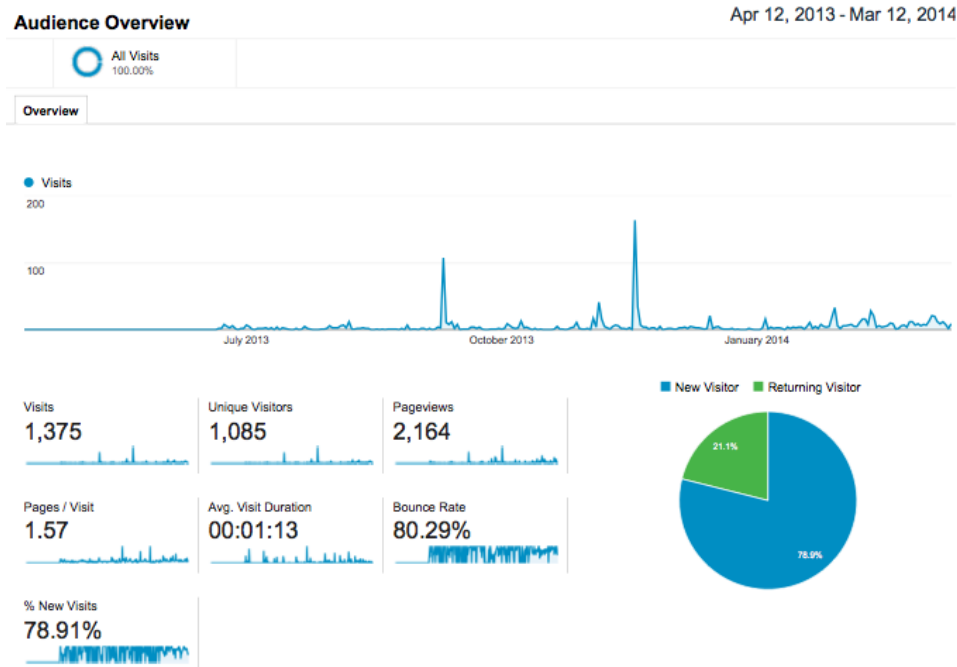


Figure 6: Google Analytics report

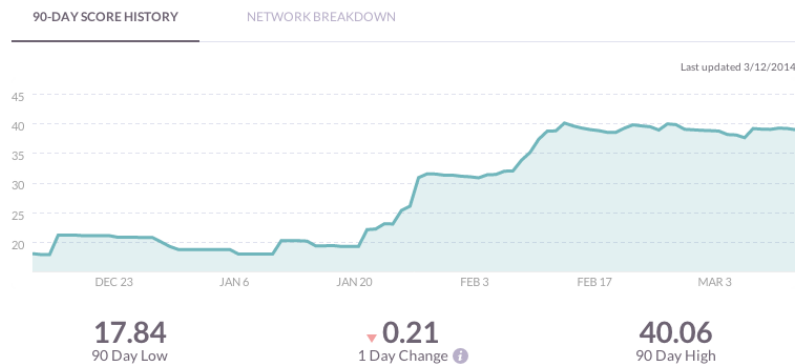


Figure 7: Klout Analytics Report

On the social media side of *On Pointe*, the *Twitter* account has 105 followers whereas the *Facebook* page has 43 likes. The *Klout* assessment shows that the project's engagement has increased significantly in January, the time when the final thesis project is being initiated. The project's highest *Klout* score was 40 out of 100.

CHAPTER FOUR

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Project Summary

On Pointe: Dancers Battle Cultural Indifference Toward Injury is a multimedia project designed to raise awareness of injuries among dancers. To achieve this goal, this multimedia project used video, audio podcast, and photography series connected through narrative writing. Featured in these media pieces are interviews with researcher and clinician Dr. Jeff Russell, creator of *Choreohealth*, an organization dedicated to the research, prevention, and treatment of injuries among dancers. Additionally, the project looks at the perspective of an injured dancer such as Ivy Chow, the principal dancer of *Gin Dance Company* based in Washington, DC.

The combination of these multimedia elements in the *On Pointe* project was promoted through social media, similar blogs or news sites, and word of mouth. Creation and promotional efforts in this multimedia project resulted in 1,375 views on the *Back of House* website, 105 followers on *Twitter*, and 43 likes on *Facebook*. Several promotional efforts will continue well beyond the publication of *On Pointe*, including the project's pitch to other news sites and blogs, as well as in-person promotion throughout the performing arts community in the Washington, D.C. area. Collectively, the multimedia project achieved its target audience: individuals ages 25 to 34 residing in the Washington, D.C. area.

Reflection

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During the initial creation stages of *On Pointe*, the project faced several challenges mainly as a result of the topic being too broad. The topic of healthcare in the performing arts can cover everything from costs, availability, and types of care, facilities, and medical practitioners. Trying to include all of these aspects in the project proved to be unsuccessful. Once research and interviews began, it became clear that the subject of the dance industry's indifference to injury is one aspect of healthcare in performance arts that desperately needed awareness. Each of the interviewees emphasized the importance of this project in hopes that it can inspire more similar projects.

Another challenge that the project faced was getting videos and photographs of dancers in the studio. Many dance schools and companies do not allow film or photography in their classrooms and dance studios because of privacy rights. Luckily, *Gin Dance Company* opened up their doors during rehearsals to allow Back of House to not only film and photograph their dancers, but also to do an interview with the company's owner and dancer. Getting a visual presentation of the dancer's movements was essential in displaying the hard work that dancers go through during training, rehearsals, and performance.

Despite the many hurdles along the way, *On Pointe* has reached its target audience, receiving many positive responses from the dance community. Interviewees shared the content among their social media circle, which increased the project's exposure. Dr. Jeff Russell of *Choreohealth* personally recommended the article on *Twitter*, and Shu-Chen Cuff of *Gin Dance Company* expressed her enjoyment of being a part of the project. The dance community has also

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responded to the many discussions on *Twitter* on the subject of dance injury with one blogger, writer for *The Healthy Dancer*, expressing an interest in collaborating for a future project in raising awareness for health among dancers.

Recommendations

To avoid future challenges in narrowing topics, it is imperative to spend more time on research and community engagement. As proven through this multimedia thesis project, it is essential to gain a complete understanding of a certain subject to obtain enough information for brainstorming. Additionally, community engagement allows for two-way communication between the writer and the readers so that the content is geared specifically to what the audience wants to consume. Blind research on a broad topic should be avoided so that the content for *Back of House* will always stay focused.

Promotional efforts for all future stories on *Back of House* must be on the same level as the *On Pointe* project. A guideline needs to be created to make sure that all future projects are produced with the highest quality and promoted fully. Apart from gaining new audience, maintaining strong promotional efforts allows for current readers to stay interested in *Back of House*. Strong promotional efforts include social media, external media, and in-person promotions.

Conclusion

Injuries are experienced among 42-97% dancers across varying backgrounds and skill levels (Russell, 2013). These injuries are considered insignificant in the dance community, causing a rise in the number of injuries.

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There is a lack of knowledge and resources in the dance industry on the prevention and treatment of injuries. On the other hand, there is also a lack of empathetic treatments from medical practitioners who are treating dancers. Understanding the different parts that make up the environment for dancers allows for all individuals, companies and studios, as well medical practitioners to work together in reducing injuries.

Projects such as *On Pointe: Dancers Battle Cultural Indifference Toward Injuries* raises awareness of the current state of injuries among dancers. The stories and insights from all individuals involved become the grounds for building a healthier environment for dancers: one where injuries are taken seriously and treatments are available when needed. Social discussion is the key to continue the awareness of injuries among dancers, whether through social media, news sites and blogs, or in-person. There is hope that there will be additional projects following *On Pointe*, as *Back of House* continues to expose the stories and issues behind the stage in the performing arts industry.

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