

Living with PCOS can be trying. Besides debilitating physical symptoms, Polycystic Ovary Syndrome or PCOS as it's more commonly called, can come with overwhelming mental/psychological symptoms that greatly reduce the ability to function normally. A considerable number of Nigerian women live with the symptoms of PCOS and only few of them have been properly diagnosed and have access to affordable and effective treatment.

It is not uncommon to hear women who have been diagnosed with PCOS say that they are far from satisfied with the medical response to their condition. Often some women are required to live with the symptoms until they are ready to bear children. Some are denied treatment and therapies that can help alleviate the symptoms or worse still, treatments that are prescribed often give rise to other unsatisfactory outcomes such as uncontrollable weight gain, acne, prolonged periods, or fewer periods altogether. It is also very common to have the physical symptoms treated while the psychological symptoms are ignored entirely. For this reason, a lot of women have resorted to joining online groups to get information on how best to manage their condition.

The rapid proliferation of online PCOS support communities indicates the extent to which PCOS has become a global health issue. It is in considering these issues that Metis Consultancy Services launched an online survey in commemoration of the PCOS month of September in 2021. Let me share these findings with you.

WHAT WE FOUND:

We had a total of 1401 valid responses to the survey. We had at least one respondent from each state in Nigeria and not a small number from Nigerian women living abroad. 87% of respondents are aged between 18-34 and this proportion made up the bulk of the lower income brackets. This same age group also makes up the bulk of the 19% of respondents that have sought treatment for PCOS.

Fig. 1- Age distribution of respondents treated PCOS

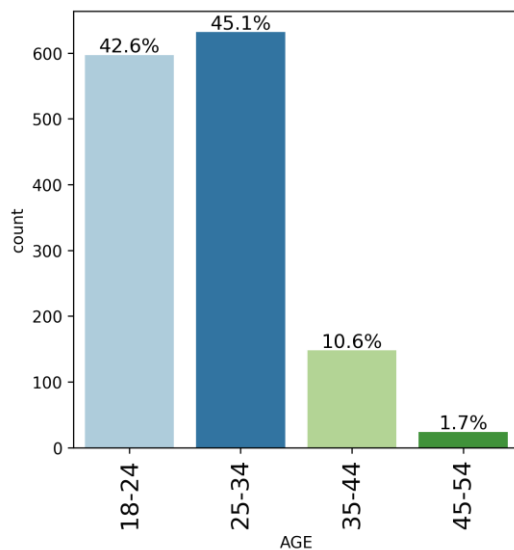
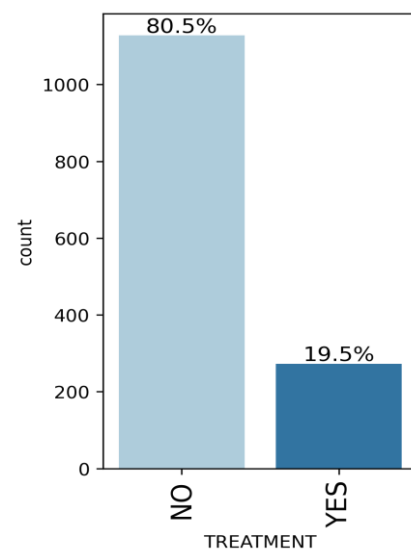


Fig. 2 – Distribution of respondents that treated PCOS



We also found that 33% of our respondent either had diabetes or were living with it while 49% of them or a family member had high blood pressure. Both conditions can be aggravated by PCOS, especially when the health is being compromised by poor health habits such as smoking, alcohol and a lack of exercise. Many of the respondents said they would like to have children and 48% of them are aged 25-34. Only about 11% of these women have treated their symptoms, despite the known effects of PCOS on fertility.

We separated the most common symptoms of PCOS into to two groups: One set of mostly physical or physiological symptoms and a second set made up of psychological symptoms. We found mood swings and mood related symptoms to be most common, followed by acne and pimples. Only roughly 2% of the women had no symptoms at all. We further batched respondents according to the number of symptoms and found that the group with 8-11 physical symptoms had a largest proportion of women who treated PCOS. When it came to physiological symptoms, significantly fewer respondents sought treatment regardless of the number of symptoms they identified.

Fig. 3a- Distribution of physical symptoms

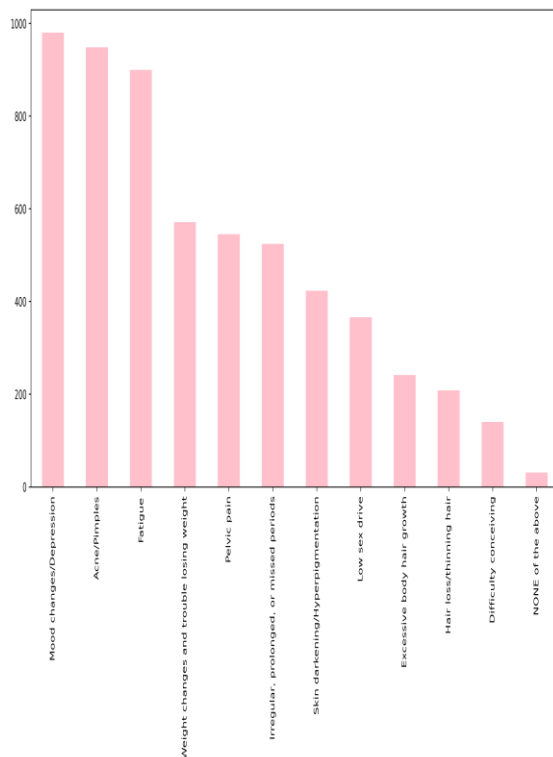


Fig. 4a- Distribution of physiological symptoms

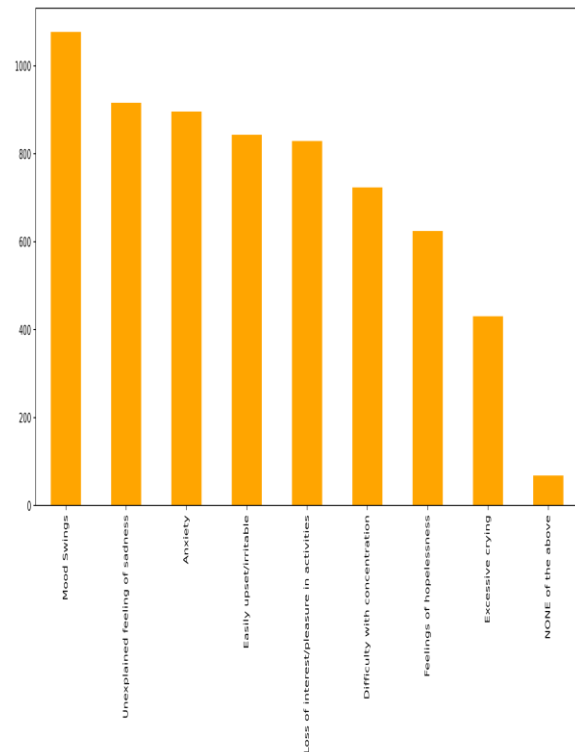
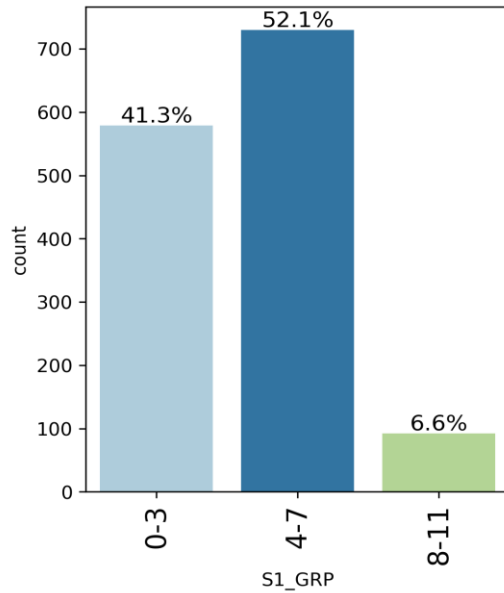
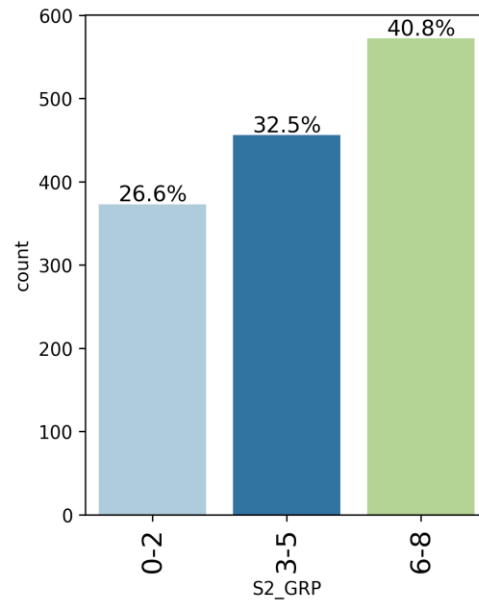
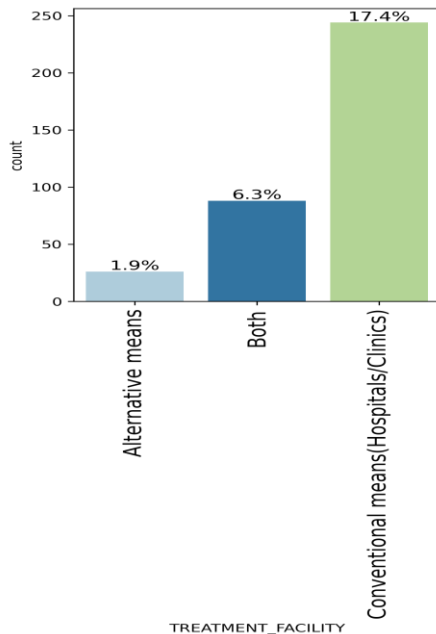
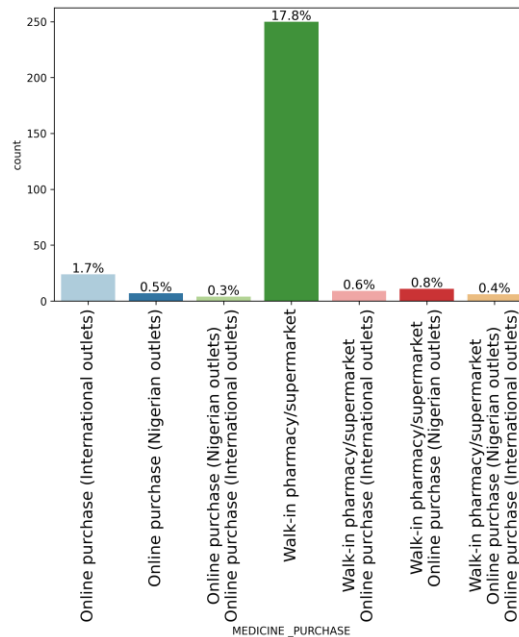


Fig. 3b- Distribution by number of physical symptoms symptoms**Fig. 4b-Distribution of by number of physiological**

Women are more inclined to seeking conventional treatment i.e., from conventional health facilities while a small fraction would use both conventional and alternative treatments. In the same way, more women would buy their medicines from walk-in pharmacies and supermarkets than purchase online. We noticed a slightly higher number of women buying medication than those who sought treatment. This indicates a tendency for some women to self-diagnose and self-medicate. Those buying medication without diagnosis purchased online both locally and from outside the country.

Fig. 7- Distribution by treatment facility**Fig. 8- Distribution by source of medication**

Among the respondents that treated their symptoms, 35% are resident outside Nigeria. The next highest number was 18% who are resident in Lagos, followed by 15% who live in the FCT. We can infer that access to good healthcare, among other factors, plays a role in the decision to treat PCOS.

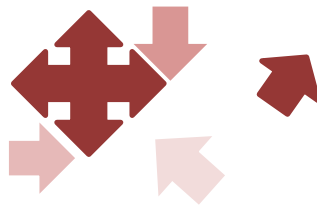
In ranking affordability of medicines purchased, 11% of the respondents living abroad ranked medication as "very expensive". This is a large number when taking into consideration the fact that almost 60% of them did not treat PCOS and as such did not respond to that question at all.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN THEN?



- A worryingly low proportion of women seek treatment for PCOS.
- More women are likely to seek treatment for physical symptoms than if they are psychological.
- Income plays a role in whether women decide to seek treatment for PCOS and those that seek treatment will do so whether they have health insurance or not.
- The availability of and access to good healthcare affects whether women will seek treatment or not.
- More women seek conventional forms of treatment i.e., from clinics and hospitals than from alternative sources.
- There are more women buying medicine than those who visit a treatment facility. This means that a portion of women self-diagnose and go ahead to buy medicines to manage their symptoms.
- The proportion of women who buy medicines without visiting a doctor tend to shop online locally and/or internationally for medication.
- The proportion of women that buy their medication from at least 3 different sources are all treating PCOS. This suggests a need to source these drugs from multiple sources either due to cost or availability or other factors that are currently outside the scope of our study.

WHAT WE WOULD LIKE TO SEE:



- Women should be able to easily access affordable diagnosis and treatment for PCOS as they would with some other health conditions. To this end, there is an urgent need to increase awareness about PCOS and other hormone related conditions. We hope to see more engagement and collaboration among stakeholders towards getting ahead of the menace that is PCOS.
- Research, research and even more research into the causes and triggers of PCOS, prevention, treatment and of course into the production of affordable, safe, and effective medication. It would be a huge breakthrough to see Nigerian pharmaceutical companies pay more attention to the development and production supplements and medications that women with PCOS need to manage their symptoms and live quality lives.
- It is important for diagnoses, treatment, and medication to be easily accessible and affordable if we are to successfully check the scourge of PCOS and other hormonal health challenges among Nigerian women.

Thank you for reading! Questions or comments? Please send an email to us at metisconsults@gmail.com.