

EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG ADULT FILIPINO WOMEN WITH PCOS IN NUEVA VIZCAYA

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ABSTRACT

Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS) is becoming increasingly recognized due to advancements in medical diagnostics and women's growing awareness of their reproductive health. However, there is limited research in the Philippines, particularly in Nueva Vizcaya, that focuses on the experiences of young adult women living with this condition. This study aimed to explore the physical, psychological, and social experiences and coping mechanisms of these women. It also offers valuable recommendations for the affected individuals, their significant others, and healthcare providers. The study focused on clinically diagnosed young adult women with PCOS in Nueva Vizcaya, aged 18–26 years, a critical age range representing the peak of reproductive potential and a major transitional phase in life. Using a descriptive-qualitative approach and purposive sampling, 18 participants from Bayombong, Bambang, and Solano were selected. They responded to a 13-question interview adapted from the PCOS Quality of Life 47 and 57, conducted face-to-face. Findings showed that participants had varied experiences across physical, psychological, and social dimensions. The psychological impact of PCOS was profound; many women reported feelings of frustration, confusion, and a perceived loss of control, often triggered by physical symptoms and societal pressures. Physical manifestations such as weight gain, acne, and hair changes contributed to emotional distress and social anxiety, which were intensified by cultural expectations. Despite these challenges, participants shared diverse coping strategies. Notably, most highlighted the importance of a strong support system in managing the condition, particularly in areas such as emotional reassurance, financial assistance, and motivational reinforcement. In general, the experiences of young adult Filipino women with PCOS in Nueva Vizcaya highlight the importance of a holistic, patient-centered approach. Enhancing awareness and understanding of PCOS in the region can lead to improved management and a better quality of life, empowering women to face the condition with resilience and confidence.

Keywords: Acne, anxiety, body image, coping, quality of life, societal pressure

INTRODUCTION

In a world where women's health issues often remain in the shadows, the Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS) emerges as a prevalent and enigmatic condition, silently affecting the lives of countless women. PCOS is a stigmatized and enigmatic condition; it is complicated to discover, diagnose, and handle (Chopra et al., 2021). Moreover, people who do not have this condition may find it difficult to understand how these young adult women with PCOS adapt to these changes remarkably.

PCOS is prevalent among women, specifically of reproductive age, and is the most prominent cause and the leading contributor to infertility, which is characterized by the inability to conceive after 12 months or more of frequent unprotected sexual activity (WHO, 2023). The study by Freeborn (2023) found that this hormonal disorder can cause excessive facial or body hair growth, acne, and increased body weight. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020), PCOS can also result in various physiological health problems, mainly when a woman's body mass index is not in check. These problems encompass diabetes, gestational diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, high LDL cholesterol, low HDL cholesterol, sleep

apnea, and stroke.

Young adults, ages ranging from 18 to 26 years old, according to the National Library of Medicine (2015), were the target population because the symptoms occur during the late teens or early 20s, such as irregular periods or no periods at all, difficulty conceiving, hirsutism, weight gain, hair loss, and acne. According to Sajida et al. (2020), women with PCOS often suffer from low self-esteem, psychological distress, and eating disorders, leading to poor quality of life, acne, hair loss, and weight gain. A study by BP et al. (2021) highlights that the need for medical practitioners to understand and support women with PCOS dramatically helps in the management of depression. In addition, sharing knowledge and personal experiences from various women with PCOS can help alleviate negative insights and perceptions about the condition (Authier, 2022).

Despite the claims of the studies mentioned above regarding the unfavorable effects of PCOS, Ghazeeri et al. (2022) emphasized that women with PCOS exhibit higher character strengths in judgment, hope, perspective, and transcendence compared to healthy patients. This study is significant because many people may be able to benefit from the results of this study, especially young adults with PCOS, for it can enable them to look into their perspective and explore a holistic point of view of their condition while having hormonal issues to prevent further complications in physical, cognitive, and emotional aspects. Also, the awareness of their parents and partners can be enhanced. As a support system, it is crucial that they understand and be equipped with sufficient knowledge about PCOS to avoid the invalidation of feelings of their loved ones, which may also lead to more complicated issues. The gathered data can also be additional knowledge for nurses in dealing with women with PCOS, not only focusing on physical care but also including psychological care, especially in the whole being of the woman. The results of this study may help researchers and future researchers to describe and understand the experiences of young adult women with PCOS.

Also, this study is anchored in Sister Callista Roy's Adaptation Model, which views individuals as bio-psycho-social beings adapting to environmental changes. PCOS serves as the event triggering adaptive responses in physiological, self-concept, role function, and interdependence modes. These dimensions guided the data collection and analysis, providing a comprehensive understanding of how women manage the challenges of PCOS.

This study explored the experiences of young adult women who are clinically diagnosed with PCOS with 6 domains: Emotional and psychological, Fertility and sexual life, Body image, Hair and acne, Obesity and menstrual irregularities, and Coping mechanisms used by the respondents to alleviate the difficult manifestations of PCOS.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive-qualitative research design to explore the subjective experiences, perceptions, and coping mechanisms of young adult women diagnosed with polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS). The study was conducted in Nueva Vizcaya, a province in the Cagayan Valley region of Luzon. It comprises 15 municipalities and 274 barangays. The municipalities of Bayombong (population: 67,714), Solano (66,123), and Bambang (50,953)—identified as first-class and the most populated towns according to the Cities and Municipalities Competitive Index 2024—served as the primary research settings.

The participants of this study were clinically diagnosed young adult women with PCOS, aged 18 to 26, residing in the municipalities of Bayombong, Solano, and Bambang, Nueva Vizcaya. A total of 15–20 participants were recruited through purposive sampling, with the final number determined.

Table 1
Profile of the Participants

Participant	Age	Address
P1	18	Solano, Nueva Vizcaya
P2	21	Bambang, Nueva Vizcaya
P3	22	Solano, Nueva Vizcaya
P4	25	Bayombong, Nueva Vizcaya
P5	26	Bayombong, Nueva Vizcaya
P6	22	Bayombong, Nueva Vizcaya
P7	22	Bayombong, Nueva Vizcaya
P8	25	Solano, Nueva Vizcaya
P9	23	Bambang, Nueva Vizcaya
P10	24	Bambang, Nueva Vizcaya
P11	19	Solano, Nueva Vizcaya
P12	20	Bayombong, Nueva Vizcaya
P13	26	Bayombong, Nueva Vizcaya
P14	22	Bambang, Nueva Vizcaya
P15	21	Solano, Nueva Vizcaya
P16	25	Bayombong, Nueva Vizcaya
P17	24	Solano, Nueva Vizcaya
P18	23	Solano, Nueva Vizcaya

The researchers used semi-structured interview guides with open-ended questions, adapted from the Polycystic Ovary Syndrome Quality of Life (PCOSQoL-45 and PCOSQoL-57) scales developed by Odhaib et al. (2021). The questions were organized into six domains: Emotional and psychological impact, Fertility and sexual life, Body image, Hair and acne, Obesity and menstrual irregularities, and Coping mechanisms. Each domain included 2–3 guiding questions, for a total of 13 questions. Questions were adjusted based on the participant's marital status, which was determined during the personal information phase of the interview. The interview guide was translated into Filipino by a licensed professional majoring in Filipino at the School of Education and Humanities. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, and nonverbal cues such as facial expressions and tone were observed to support interpretation.

Before data collection, the researchers sought permission from the Municipal Health Offices (MHOs) and Local Government Units (LGUs) in Bayombong, Solano, and Bambang. A letter detailing the study's objectives and data requirements was submitted. A preliminary survey was distributed in selected barangays to identify potential participants and raise awareness about PCOS. Using purposive sampling, eligible women were invited to participate voluntarily. During the home visits, the researchers were accompanied by their adviser-promoter and a community nurse or midwife. The study was explained thoroughly, and participants provided signed informed consent before the interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes to one hour. Participants' privacy was respected by conducting interviews in a private area of their homes. With consent, interviews were audio- and video-recorded, and one researcher simultaneously took notes. Participants' pseudonyms were used for anonymity. Afterward, the recordings were transcribed and used for data analysis.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, supported by a thematic count; however, the results of the count were not included in the analysis, as they were deemed to be in line with qualitative research. This qualitative analysis followed Braun's approach, emphasizing authenticity, emotional depth, and participant voice. Braun's method ensured a humanized portrayal of life with PCOS, encompassing physical, emotional, social, and psychological dimensions, which contributed to meaningful insights and actionable recommendations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Section 1: Experiences of Young Adult Women in Nueva Vizcaya Clinically Diagnosed with PCOS.

This study explored the lived experiences of young adult women in Nueva Vizcaya who have been clinically diagnosed with Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS). Through careful analysis of their shared narratives, three major themes were identified: emotional and psychological challenges, physical health concerns, and social difficulties.

Theme 1. Emotional and Psychological Challenges

One of the most prominent themes was the emotional and psychological burden brought about by PCOS. Many participants reported experiencing frequent mood swings, often without clear or predictable triggers. These abrupt emotional changes affected their daily routines and personal relationships, contributing to feelings of frustration, anxiety, and even depression. Participants described moments of uncontrollable irritability and sadness, sometimes triggered by hormonal shifts or environmental factors such as heat. These accounts reflect findings by Benjamin et al. (2023), who noted that women with PCOS are more vulnerable to mental health challenges due to hormonal imbalances.

Concerns about body image were also widespread. Physical manifestations such as weight gain, acne, hair loss, and excessive hair growth deeply affected participants' self-perceptions. Many expressed discomfort with their appearance, avoiding mirrors and feeling hesitant to engage in social situations. Their words conveyed a struggle with self-acceptance and the emotional pain of comparing themselves to societal standards of beauty. Similar sentiments have been documented by Alkheyr et al. (2024), who emphasized the negative impact of PCOS symptoms on self-esteem.

Participants also highlighted the emotional stress associated with irregular menstruation. The unpredictability of their cycles caused ongoing worry, especially regarding their health and reproductive future. Some shared that the absence of menstruation led to fears of infertility. In contrast, others expressed distress over having excessively prolonged periods. This sense of uncertainty contributed to a loss of control over their own bodies. As noted by Wang et al. (2023), irregular menstrual patterns are a common cause of anxiety among women with PCOS.

The fear of infertility emerged as a particularly emotional aspect of their experiences. Even among those not currently planning to have children, there was a shared concern about the possibility of being unable to conceive in the future. This fear often led to feelings of grief, inadequacy, and confusion about their womanhood. Sharma and Shrivastava (2022) similarly reported that infertility-related concerns are a major psychological burden for women diagnosed with PCOS.

Theme 2. Physical Health Concerns

Physical health issues also played a significant role in participants' experiences. Nearly all reported signs of hormonal imbalance, including fatigue, intense food cravings, and significant changes in their menstrual cycles. These symptoms often appeared suddenly and affected both their physical health and emotional stability. Carmina et al. (2022) and Zhang et al. (2024) have both noted that PCOS is closely linked with disruptions in the hypothalamic-pituitary-ovarian axis, which plays a central role in hormonal regulation.

Unexplained weight gain, especially in the abdominal area, was another common concern.

Participants expressed frustration over their inability to manage their weight despite conscious efforts. Some mentioned receiving unsolicited comments about their appearance, which led to feelings of embarrassment and shame. This aligns with previous studies, such as those by Ee et al. (2021) and Kim (2021), which link PCOS to metabolic disturbances and insulin resistance that make weight management more difficult.

In addition to weight concerns, participants reported excessive hair growth on the chin and upper lip, as well as significant scalp hair loss. These physical changes were deeply distressing and affected their confidence and day-to-day activities. Many described spending extra time grooming or avoiding going out altogether. Spritzer et al. (2022) and Bai et al. (2024) have identified androgen excess as a key contributor to both hirsutism and hair thinning among women with PCOS.

Section 2. Coping Mechanisms and Strategies to Alleviate the Difficulties of Having PCOS

Coping mechanisms refer to the ways individuals emotionally, mentally, and physically respond to the challenges of conditions like PCOS. These mechanisms can include actively managing symptoms or more passive strategies, such as avoiding negative feelings or relying on familiar routines. Coping is highly individual, depending on how a person processes and deals with frustrations such as acne, weight gain, and hormonal imbalances.

Theme 3. Relieving stress

Participants adopted various strategies to relieve stress, which was a common response to the emotional burden of PCOS. Activities such as yoga, drawing, journaling, playing games, and skincare helped alleviate feelings of anxiety and sadness. As P2 expressed, "*When I draw or play games, somehow, I forget my heavy feelings,*" illustrating how creative outlets provided emotional relief. However, not all participants found stress management easy; P7 shared ongoing struggles with controlling stress. Research supports these observations, with Fauser et al. (2012) emphasizing that chronic stress can aggravate hormonal imbalances in PCOS. Rasquin-Leopold and Kaltenbach (2021) further note that physical and creative activities help reduce anxiety, while Greenwood et al. (2016) argue that informal coping strategies may not suffice for everyone. These findings suggest the importance of assessing individual stress levels and incorporating structured stress-relief techniques, such as mindfulness, into patient care.

Theme 4. Managing Weight

Managing weight was a central concern for many participants, given PCOS's association with insulin resistance and weight gain. Strategies such as adopting a low-glycemic index (low-GI) diet and engaging in regular physical activity were common. P1 noted, "*Ever since I changed my diet, especially doing the GI diet, I feel lighter and in control of my body.*" These changes brought not only physical benefits but also psychological empowerment. Despite this, others, like P3, reported challenges with consistency due to fatigue and low motivation. The literature supports these experiences—Lim et al. (2019) found that weight loss improves insulin sensitivity and PCOS symptoms, yet Hutchison et al. (2019) highlighted how metabolic and hormonal factors make weight management particularly difficult for women with PCOS. This underscores the need for tailored support from healthcare providers that includes both physical guidance and emotional encouragement.

Theme 5. Self-Acceptance

Developing self-acceptance emerged as a powerful coping mechanism. Participants described learning to embrace their condition and focus on what they could control—such as self-care routines, diet, and mindset. P1 stated, "*Even if I have PCOS, I still think that things will be*

all right. This gives me strength." Others, like P2, used daily affirmations, while P3 credited emotional strength to a supportive environment. However, not all responses were positive; P4 admitted to avoiding thoughts about PCOS due to feeling overwhelmed. Gupta et al. (2019) and Levine et al. (2021) highlight that positive self-regard and optimism can strengthen emotional resilience. Still, Morrison et al. (2020) warn that avoidance may delay emotional processing. These findings indicate that while fostering self-acceptance is crucial, emotional avoidance should be addressed to prevent deeper psychological distress.

Theme 6. Self-care Practices

Self-care routines, especially skincare and makeup, played a significant role in helping participants manage visible symptoms such as acne and in enhancing their self-esteem. For many, these routines served as both a form of control and emotional relief. As P1 noted, *"Skincare is one of my stress relievers,"* and P3 shared that managing acne improved her confidence. While self-care had positive effects on emotional well-being, Daniels et al. (2018) caution that excessive reliance on appearance-focused coping may obscure underlying emotional issues. Still, other studies affirm the benefits of routine self-care in improving body image and emotional stability (Kaur & Kaur, 2021; Hall et al., 2020). These insights highlight the value of promoting balanced self-care practices in clinical settings, alongside emotional support and education.

Theme 7. Strong Support System

A strong support system—comprising family, friends, healthcare professionals, and faith communities—proved essential in helping participants manage PCOS. Emotional encouragement helped many participants maintain treatment plans and stay hopeful. P2 shared, *"My family, especially my mom, has been such a big help... they encourage me not to give up,"* while P8 stated, *"Whenever I feel anxious, I remind myself of God's promise never to leave me."* These narratives reflect the importance of both relational and spiritual support. The literature supports this, noting that social support improves psychological outcomes and treatment adherence (Bazarganipour et al., 2015; Moran et al., 2017). Conversely, Kitzinger and Willmott (2002) found that a lack of understanding within families can worsen feelings of isolation. These findings affirm that nurses and healthcare providers should assess and strengthen each patient's support network as part of holistic and culturally sensitive care.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

Findings revealed that beyond physical symptoms such as irregular menstruation, weight gain, and acne, PCOS significantly impacts emotional well-being and social interactions. Participants reported feelings of frustration, low self-esteem, and emotional distress, often influenced by societal beauty standards and fertility concerns. Despite these challenges, many demonstrated resilience through self-acceptance, personal growth, and engagement in coping strategies such as physical activity, skincare routines, and stress-relieving hobbies. Social support from family, friends, healthcare providers, and faith-based communities played a critical role in fostering emotional strength and encouraging healthy lifestyle changes. The study underscores the importance of a holistic, patient-centered approach to PCOS management, one that integrates medical treatment with psychological and social support. Promoting awareness, enhancing support systems, and prioritizing mental health can improve the overall well-being of women with PCOS.

Recommendations

A complex or multifaceted approach is the key factor in effective management of PCOS. The understanding gained from these women's experiences led to a clear but not in-depth exploration of specific experiences and management. These recommendations include strengthening the support system by increasing people's awareness of PCOS through information dissemination, learning materials, or social media posters, or by collaborating with existing support groups in Nueva Vizcaya. Emphasizing the need for a multifaceted approach to promote the optimal well-being of patients. Early detection is also a must for prompt management, by collaborating with the Local Government to provide free Obstetric consultation. Lastly, future Researchers who want to further explore how women with PCOS have overcome the challenges and regained normal functioning to gain deeper insight into the coping mechanisms used. Through these, the quality of life will be enhanced.

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