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COSMETIC AND MEDICAL CONTACT LENS USE AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF BEHAVIOUR, HYGIENE, AND OCULAR SYMPTOMS

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BACKGROUND: Contact lens use among university students increasingly extends beyond refractive correction into cosmetic and aesthetic domains. Online marketplaces, beauty retailers, and social media exposure have expanded access to cosmetic contact lenses, yet behavioural patterns, hygiene practices, and ocular health experiences among young users remain insufficiently explored in Thailand. This study aimed to qualitatively explore cosmetic and medical contact lens use among university students, focusing on motivations, hygiene behaviours, ocular symptoms, and healthcare-seeking practices.

METHODS: A qualitative interview study was conducted using maximum variation purposive sampling among four university students representing different contact lens profiles: male medical lens user, female cosmetic lens user, female medical lens user, and male cosmetic lens user. Semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analysed using thematic analysis. Findings were organised using an upstream–midstream–downstream behavioural framework examining determinants, contact lens behaviours, and ocular outcomes.

RESULTS: Three major themes emerged. First, cosmetic contact lens users demonstrated stronger social media and peer influence, with motivations centred on appearance enhancement, confidence, cosplay, and aesthetic presentation. Medical lens users primarily described functional motivations related to refractive correction and convenience.

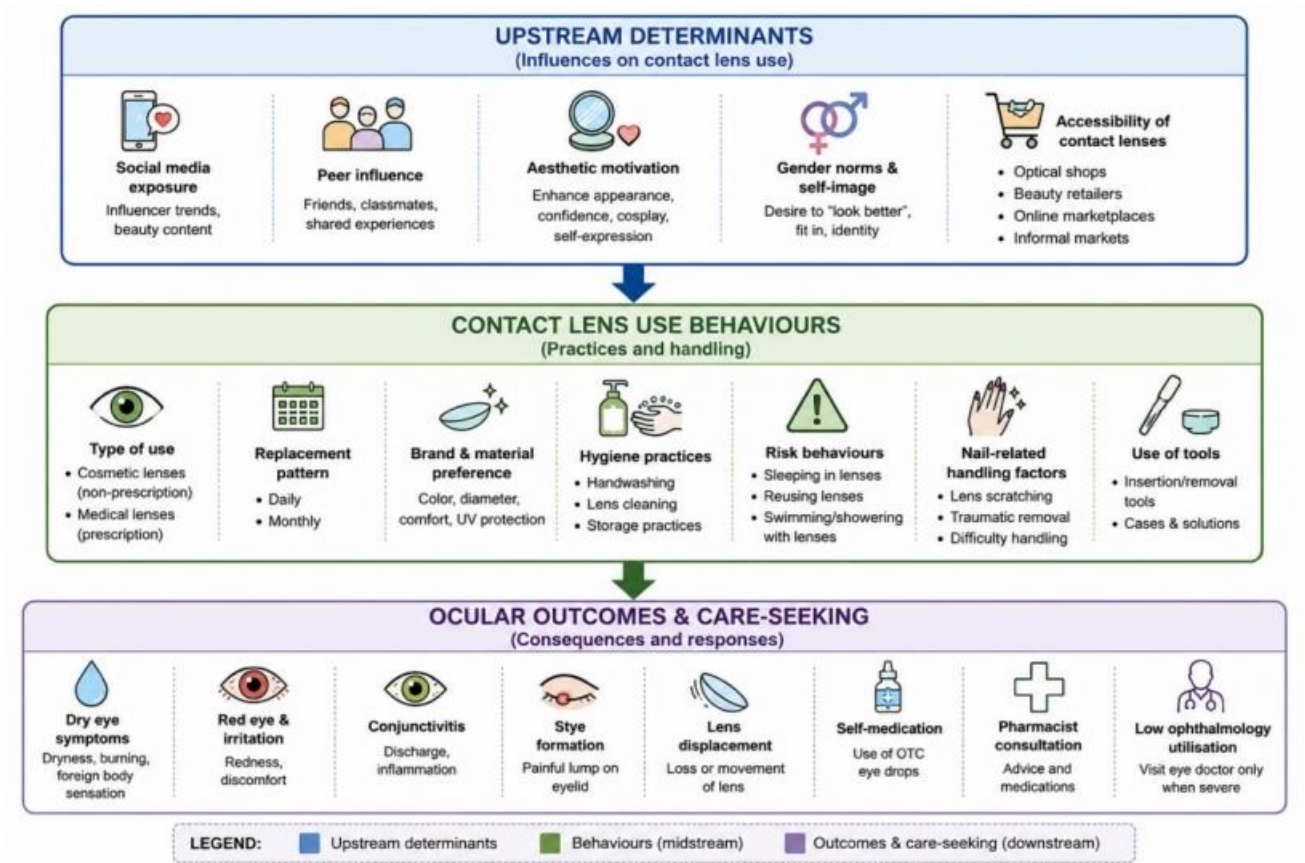
Second, purchasing pathways and hygiene behaviours differed substantially between groups. Cosmetic lens users reported broader purchasing channels, including online platforms, beauty retailers, and informal markets, while medical users relied mainly on optical shops. Risk behaviours included sleeping in lenses, prolonged wear, swimming while wearing lenses, inconsistent hand hygiene, and occasional lens re-use. Nail-related handling issues emerged as a novel theme among cosmetic users, including lens scratching and traumatic lens removal associated with long fingernails.

Third, all participants reported dry eye symptoms during contact lens wear, regardless of lens type. Additional complications included conjunctivitis, redness, irritation, sty formation, and lens displacement. Despite these symptoms, healthcare utilisation was low, with most participants relying on over-the-counter eye drops, pharmacists, and self-management rather than professional ophthalmic care.

CONCLUSION: Contact lens use among university students is shaped by complex interactions between aesthetic motivations, social influences, accessibility, and behavioural practices. Cosmetic contact lens users demonstrated greater exposure to informal purchasing pathways and higher-risk behaviours. Dry eye symptoms and self-management practices were common across all users. These findings may inform future quantitative surveys and targeted eye-health education interventions for young contact lens users.

Key Words: Contact Lenses; Dry Eye Syndromes; Students; Qualitative Research; Health Behaviour.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Cosmetic and Medical Contact Lens Use Among University Students



Conceptual framework derived from qualitative interviews exploring cosmetic and medical contact lens use among university students. The framework illustrates relationships between upstream determinants, contact lens use behaviours, and downstream ocular outcomes and healthcare-seeking practices.