

# Occupational Mental Wellness and Hygiene: A Focus on Janitors' Workwear in the Sri Lankan Apparel Industry.

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**Abstract** – *The janitorial personnel possess strong individual personalities as they serve silently and deserve better recognition, all the while maintaining a clean and sparkling everyday world. With real-life experiences and real-world statistics on Janitors' Workwear, this unattended sector of apparel requirements has shown potential for innovations benefiting humanity and safety. However, the impact of workwear on hygiene and mental wellness for janitors remains questionable. The purpose of this study is to investigate janitor workwear in the Sri Lankan apparel sector and assess how it affects the hygiene and mental wellness of janitorial personnel. The study utilised thematic analysis, drawing from information gathered through interviews with a pool of janitors selected through purposive sampling and questionnaires completed by their supervisors and close working executives. Additionally, secondary data was collected from literature to provide further references. The findings of this research have been justified and presented within a thematic analysis framework. This study holds relevance for various stakeholders, including future researchers, apparel sector workers, janitorial firms, workwear designers, apparel sector Human Resource teams, and others seeking such information.*

**Keywords:** Janitorial Services, Workwear, Hygiene, Mental Wellness, Sri Lanka

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## Introduction

As the largest export industry in Sri Lanka (EDB, 2022), the Apparel Industry employs thousands of workers in the manufacturing sector. Therefore, cleaning or janitorial services have been a priority to ensure the safety and well-being of its employees and maintain a professional image for the organisations. Janitorial services are crucial for maintaining clean and healthy workplaces, encompassing both indoor and outdoor cleaning tasks (Thompson et al., 1997). Despite being an overlooked sector, janitor apparel offers potential for innovations that can improve humanity and safety. Designers can create affordable, safe, and hygienic apparel with a focus on durability through quality materials. This approach promotes sustainability and empowerment for these individuals, who contribute to making the world of work a better place (Azuwike & Eboh, 2020). This study illuminates the hidden truth about janitors, who are important members of society yet are frequently overlooked. Work clothing influences one's role and quality of life at work (Mäkynen, 2017). Therefore, the study aims to investigate the support provided for hygiene and mental well-being of the Janitor workwear in the Sri Lankan Apparel Sector.

The chief investigator of this study had the opportunity to closely work with the janitorial staff at the workplace during the internship, witnessing their challenging conditions. Proper identification of those factors leads to empowering them with better recognition. The study aims to gather data that can lead to improvements in janitor workwear through the janitors, their supervisors, and close working executives. The findings of this study inform future researchers, apparel sector workers, janitorial firms, workwear designers, and apparel sector Human Resource teams about insights into janitorial apparel and their role.

## Methodology

This study was conducted as a part of chief investigator's year three undergraduate research project, designed to investigate and explore how janitor workwear in the Sri Lankan Apparel Sector is associated with hygiene and mental wellness. The study utilises a mixed-method approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods, drawing data from both primary and secondary sources.

### Data collections

The data collection for the study was primarily based on interviews, questionnaire surveys, and observations relevant to the selected area of study. The pool of participants was selected through purposive sampling.

### Interviews

Semi-structured Interviews with janitor workers from Three Major Apparel firms (C1/C2/C3). The semi-structured interviews were conducted during the participants' work shifts with permission from their supervisors to capture the widest scope of information and potential new data, taking into consideration their literacy levels. The interviews included questions on their views of the service they provided and day-to-day feedback from others. Thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) was used to identify focused outcomes from the collected data.

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### **Questionnaire**

Two questionnaires were shared among selected executives and Janitorial Supervisors at Three Major Firms (C1/C2/C3). The questionnaire for executives and supervisors was distributed online in order to maximise efficiency and scalability. The participants in this category were asked about their perspectives on janitors. End-of-questionnaire data has been analysed, cross-referenced, and justified alongside thematic analysis data.

### **Observation**

The behavioural routine and the attire habits of the janitor workers was observed in all the three apparel firms according to the observation guide which includes, in and out time, types of work they do, attire, its functionality, and Hygiene.

### **Participants**

The research sample of the study is identified and grouped from three major Apparel Firms of Sri Lanka (C1/C2/C3) and selection of them was based on the expert suggestions and the capacity of export apparel manufacturing. Chief investigator of the study contacted all three firms with the approval of company management in order to conduct the Study. Respective participants of the study as in below. Table 1 and 2 provide details of participants and the companies.

- Janitorial workers at Apparel Firms (C1/C2/C3) (*All three firms outsourced the Janitors from manpower agencies and all workwear are provided through manpower agencies*)
- Janitorial Supervisors at Apparel Firms (C1/C2/C3)
- Executive and Managerial staff at Apparel Firms (C1/C2/C3)

### **Selection & Sampling;**

The population of this study selected through purposive Sampling which ensures the key points of relevance to the subject matters. Participants [janitors, supervisors, executives] represent contrasting sections; [Production floor, Design, Management]. Interviews conducted with 14 Janitors from all 3 firms and the questionnaire is distributed purposefully among 25 executives and enclosed the online questionnaire by the 20 responses. All the participants' details were collected with their permission and secured their privacy with an ethical statement provided.

### **Data Analysis**

The participants described their role including experience and interactions with different aspects of the industry within the perspectives of Hygiene and Mental Wellness. The thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) is carried out by using the interview transcripts and the supportive data gathered from the questionnaires and observations. The results are presented through two major themes inductively derived from the study which are Hygiene and Mental-wellness. The following section explores these two themes in detail along with quotes from the participants which are identified by a code representing company and participant number.

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TABLE I  
PARTICIPANTS INFORMATION- CODING & CATEGORIZATION

No	Apparel Firm	Code	Gender	Designation
	Interviews			
	<b>Company 1- (C1)</b>			
01		C1J1	Male	Janitor
02		C1J2	Female	Janitor
03		C1J3	Male	Janitor
04		C1J4	Female	Janitor
05		C1J5	Male	Janitor
	<b>Company 2- (C2)</b>			
06		C2J1	Male	Janitor
07		C2J2	Male	Janitor
08		C2J3	Female	Janitor
09		C2J4	Female	Janitor
	<b>Company 3- (C3)</b>			
10		C3J1	Male	Janitor
11		C3J2	Female	Janitor
12		C3J3	Female	Janitor
13		C3J4	Male	Janitor
14		C3J5	Male	Janitor

## Results And Discussion

Janitorial workwear in the Sri Lankan apparel sector must meet a number of specifications to ensure worker safety, comfort, and productivity. With the research findings and emerging thematic facts, it is evident that there is a certain need for a proper janitor Kit [outfit] which complement their day today functions at work.

*We are required to wear the T-shirt given by them along with black pants, there are no regulations on footwear if working inside but for outside and water work, we wear boots given by them. We only got t-shirts for the whole year. (Company C1/ Participant C1J1)*

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TABLE 2  
 COMPANY PROFILES SELECTED AND BRIEFING

Company Profiles	
Company 1 (C1)	C1 is Sri Lankan pioneering export apparel manufacturing facility for intimates and activewear with over 16,000 employees, delivering products for world-class brands including Victoria's Secret, Triumph, Lululemon, New Balance, and Nike.
Company 2 (C2)	C2 is a prominent design centre for one of Sri Lanka's top clothing exporters, which also has facilities in India and Bangladesh. They provide products for well-known brands such as Calvin Klein, Zara, and Tommy Hilfiger.
Company 3 (C3)	Company 3 is a manufacturing facility of apparel giant established in Sri Lanka with branches in over 15 countries. The specific facility includes 3000 employees and manufactures garments for Nike, Lindex, H&M, and Victoria's Secret.

Most crucially, some issues, such as janitors' self-perception of their workwear, occupational respect through workwear deserve attention (Masullo, 2020). Despite the fact that there is no need for particularly created garments for Janitorial workwear, [Janitors] Management is striving to regulate the apparel. Janitor uniforms should be composed of high-quality, long-lasting fabrics that can resist everyday wear and tear. Clothing should be resistant to abrasions, harsh chemicals, and repeated washings.

*We follow the protocol strictly when going into hazard areas like bonding and moulding chemical cleaning. It's a must to wear gloves and a mask along with boots. (Company C1/ Participant CJ2)*

Janitorial staff are frequently required to follow strict safety protocols and guidelines while cleaning due to the sensitive nature of the materials and equipment used in the apparel sector (Albright, 2008).

Janitorial personnel in the Sri Lankan apparel industry require a specific mindset and mental support to meet the demands of their job. States below are some factors that can help to maintain a positive mindset and mental health being for janitor staff.

*I don't want to highlight myself from others at the factory but I think it is easy to have a proper outfit that suits for work rather than a T-shirt and pants. (Company C2/ Participant J3)*

Currently the Apparel Firms [C1,C2,C3] is giving equal rights to the janitor workers as executives regarding the hygienic needs which can be considered as a good industrial practice . However,

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there are lacking areas that need to be improved, including the perception of the executives and management on the Janitors.

*...but it is hard to deal with the embarrassment when the executives' staffs are bullied and blamed for the mistakes in Infront of everyone. We are responsible but we are not prepared for losing ourselves. (Company C1/ Participant C1J3)*

As such the findings of this study have given insight into the objectives of the research on investigating how Sri Lankan Apparel Sector janitor workwear is supported for hygiene and mental wellness.

Janitor workwear in the apparel sector is lacking essentials including durability, utility, water resistance, and protection against hazards as their workwear is typically sourced low-cost by manpower agencies. As the country's clothing industry develops, companies will be able to produce high-quality protective clothing for janitors, potentially opening up a new global market.

The findings also highlighted significant insights about the mental wellness of the janitor in the sector [Apparel]. The areas that need attention are psychological & physical harassment, wage and hour violations which evidenced through the past decade (Beltran, 2020). Janitors in the Sri Lankan apparel sector need a positive mindset and mental support to cope with the demands of their job and maintain good mental health as findings elaborate.

Furthermore, the study demonstrates how simple appreciation motivates individuals throughout the day and how the perfect remark elevates their career for the better. There are certain communication and literacy difficulties, but adequate training and adoption of supervisors can be offered as a remedy.

*I Don't feel good when I get ignored when they see my outfit mentioning janitorial-related words. But having a brand name is fine since I respect the place I work. I prefer if executives and staff can call me by my name, that makes me confident to deal with them. (Company C3/ Participant C3J4)*

As highlighted, the study's results draw attention to key areas in janitorial service: lifestyle, workwear, and their impact on various aspects. Through our analysis, we developed Figure 1 - The Janitors Service Impact - which illustrates the interconnectedness between hygiene, workwear, mental wellness, and interpersonal relationships. This figure demonstrates how these four factors (Hygiene, Personal Relation Skills, Mental wellness, and workwear) elevate the quality of their service and the lives of janitorial staff. However, the most influential element in this interconnected system is proper workwear. Safer and protective workwear contributes to good hygiene, visually appealing workwear with good hygiene supports the development of positive interpersonal relationships, and proper mental wellness is a combination of all these factors. In summary, the study emphasises the importance of workwear and its role in improving the overall well-being and effectiveness of janitorial service personnel.

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## Conclusion And Implications

Starting with the identification of this novel research area concerning the underexplored sector and the individuals who play a crucial role in making our daily lives pleasant, while also contributing significantly to the smooth functioning of the Sri Lankan Apparel industry. Through a comprehensive literature review, limited resources, interviews, questionnaires, and thematic analysis, it was concluded that the Sri Lankan apparel industry's focus on janitor workwear hygiene is a commendable initiative. Maintaining a safe and healthy work environment for janitorial workers requires ensuring high levels of cleanliness and personal hygiene. Furthermore, providing janitorial staff with comfortable and appropriate workwear can have positive effects on their mental health, boosting their confidence, self-esteem, and overall job satisfaction. The findings and relevant references from this study contribute valuable insights to the knowledge and practices of the janitorial sector in Sri Lanka, which could, in turn, inform actions for improving janitorial services, ultimately benefiting similar sectors globally.

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