iJRASET
International Journal For Research in
Applied Science and Engineering Technology

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR RESEARCH

IN APPLIED SCIENCE & ENGINEERING TECHNOLOGY

Volume: 14 **Issue:** III **Month of publication:** March 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.22214/ijraset.2026.78482

International Journal for Research in Applied Science & Engineering Technology (IJRASET)
ISSN: 2321-9653; IC Value: 45.98; SJ Impact Factor: 7.538
Volume 14 Issue III Mar 2026- Available at www.ijraset.com

Advanced Stain-Resistant Finishes in Textiles: Mechanisms, Materials, Applications, and Sustainable Innovations

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Abstract: Stain-resistant finishes are advanced functional treatments applied to textile materials to prevent the adhesion and penetration of liquids, dirt, and contaminants into fabric structures. These finishes primarily operate by reducing the surface energy of textile fibers, thereby altering wettability and causing liquids to form spherical droplets that can be easily removed. A wide range of chemical agents, including fluorocarbon-based compounds, silicone finishes, polymeric coatings, and emerging bio-based materials such as chitosan, are utilized to achieve this functionality. In addition, application techniques such as padding, spraying, dip coating, and surface coating are employed depending on fabric type and end-use requirements. Recent advancements in nanotechnology have significantly enhanced stain resistance by introducing nanoscale roughness and enabling superhydrophobicity, often inspired by biomimetic structures such as lotus leaves. These innovations not only improve stain repellency but also introduce self-cleaning properties, thereby reducing maintenance requirements. Stain-resistant textiles are extensively used in apparel, home furnishings, healthcare textiles, and protective clothing. Current research trends are focused on improving durability, multifunctionality, and environmental sustainability of these finishes (Periolatto et al., 2021; Rastogi & Kandasubramanian, 2020; Xue et al., 2019).

Keywords: superhydrophobicity, healthcare textiles, chitosan, silicone finishes, nanotechnology

I. INTRODUCTION

Textile finishing represents the final and most critical stage in textile manufacturing, where chemical and mechanical processes are applied to enhance the functional and aesthetic properties of fabrics. Among the various finishing techniques, stain-resistant finishing has gained considerable importance due to increasing consumer demand for easy-care, durable, and high-performance textiles. Natural fibers such as cotton, hemp, and jute are widely used due to their comfort, breathability, and biodegradability; however, their inherent hydrophilic nature makes them highly susceptible to liquid absorption and staining. When exposed to common staining agents such as oils, beverages, and environmental pollutants, these fibers readily absorb liquids through capillary action, leading to deep and persistent stains. This not only affects the visual appearance of the fabric but also reduces its durability due to repeated washing cycles and chemical treatments. To overcome these limitations, stain-resistant finishes are applied to create a protective barrier on the fiber surface, thereby preventing liquid penetration and enabling easy removal of contaminants. These finishes significantly enhance the service life and performance of textile materials (Fan & Hunter, 2009; Holme, 2022).

II. FUNDAMENTALS OF STAINING AND SURFACE INTERACTION

Textile materials are frequently exposed to different types of staining agents during usage, which can adversely affect their performance and hygiene. Stains are generally classified into water-based, oil-based, and protein-based categories depending on their chemical composition. Water-based stains contain soluble substances such as sugars and salts, which easily penetrate hydrophilic fibers. Oil-based stains, composed of non-polar compounds such as fats and greases, strongly adhere to fibers and are difficult to remove using conventional cleaning methods. Protein-based stains, derived from biological sources, tend to coagulate under heat, making them even more resistant to removal. The interaction between stains and textile surfaces is governed by surface energy and intermolecular forces. High surface energy materials promote liquid spreading and absorption, while low surface energy surfaces repel liquids, preventing wetting. This behavior is explained through wetting theory and contact angle principles, which play a crucial role in designing stain-resistant finishes. By modifying the surface energy of textile fibers, it is possible to control liquid behavior and enhance stain resistance (Gao & McCarthy, 2018; Zhang et al., 2019).

III. MECHANISM OF STAIN-RESISTANT FINISHES

The effectiveness of stain-resistant finishes is primarily based on two key mechanisms: stain repellency and stain release. Stain repellency involves preventing the penetration of liquids into the fabric structure by creating a hydrophobic or oleophobic surface. This is achieved by reducing the surface energy of the fibers, causing liquids to form droplets rather than spreading. On the other hand, stain release allows limited penetration of contaminants but ensures that they can be easily removed during laundering. The balance between these two mechanisms depends on the chemical composition of the finish and the intended application of the textile. Advanced finishing systems often combine both mechanisms to provide optimal performance under different environmental conditions. The integration of these mechanisms enhances fabric functionality and improves user convenience (Rastogi & Kandasubramanian, 2020).

IV. HYDROPHOBICITY AND LOTUS EFFECT

Hydrophobicity is a fundamental property that determines the ability of a surface to repel water. Superhydrophobic surfaces, characterized by water contact angles greater than 150°, exhibit extreme water repellency. This phenomenon is often inspired by the lotus leaf, which possesses a hierarchical micro- and nanostructure that prevents water from adhering to its surface. As water droplets roll off the surface, they carry dirt particles with them, resulting in a self-cleaning effect known as the lotus effect. In textile applications, this biomimetic approach is used to develop fabrics that remain clean and dry even under challenging conditions. The combination of low surface energy materials and surface roughness is essential for achieving superhydrophobicity and enhancing stain resistance (Gao & McCarthy, 2018).

V. CHEMICALS USED IN STAIN-RESISTANT FINISHES

A wide range of chemical agents are used in the development of stain-resistant finishes, each offering specific advantages. Fluorocarbon-based compounds are among the most effective due to their extremely low surface energy, which provides both water and oil repellency. Silicone-based finishes are widely used to impart softness and water resistance by forming flexible hydrophobic films on the fiber surface. Polymeric coatings such as acrylics and polyurethanes create a physical barrier that prevents the penetration of contaminants while maintaining fabric strength. Chitosan, a natural biopolymer derived from chitin, has gained attention due to its biodegradability, non-toxicity, and antimicrobial properties. Silane coupling agents are also used to improve the adhesion of coatings to textile fibers. The selection of appropriate chemicals depends on factors such as fabric type, desired performance, and environmental considerations (Mahltig & Textor, 2019; Shahidi & Wiener, 2021).

VI. APPLICATION TECHNIQUES

The application of stain-resistant finishes onto textiles can be achieved through several industrial techniques, each offering distinct advantages. The padding method is the most commonly used process, where fabric is passed through a finishing solution and squeezed between rollers to ensure uniform application. Spraying is used for localized treatments, allowing controlled deposition of chemicals. Dip coating involves immersing the fabric in a solution to achieve deep penetration of the finish. Surface coating techniques such as knife coating apply a thin, uniform layer on the fabric surface. After application, the fabric undergoes drying and curing processes to fix the finish onto the fibers and enhance durability. Process parameters such as temperature, pressure, and curing time significantly influence the effectiveness of the finish (Holme, 2022).

VII. ROLE OF FIBER TYPE AND FABRIC STRUCTURE

The performance of stain-resistant finishes is strongly influenced by the type of fiber and the structural characteristics of the fabric. Natural fibers such as cotton are highly absorbent and prone to water-based stains, whereas synthetic fibers such as polyester exhibit lower absorbency but attract oil-based contaminants. Fabric structure, including weave pattern, density, and porosity, also affects liquid behavior. Tightly woven fabrics offer better resistance to liquid penetration compared to loosely structured fabrics. Surface roughness plays a crucial role in enhancing hydrophobicity by trapping air pockets and reducing liquid contact area. Therefore, the selection of appropriate finishing treatments must consider both fiber composition and fabric structure to achieve optimal performance (Fan & Hunter, 2009).

VIII. ADVANCED SURFACE MODIFICATION TECHNIQUES

Recent advancements in textile engineering have introduced innovative surface modification techniques to enhance stain resistance. Nanotechnology has enabled the incorporation of nanoparticles such as silica, titanium dioxide, and zinc oxide, which create hierarchical surface structures that improve hydrophobicity and provide additional functionalities such as UV protection and antimicrobial activity. Plasma treatment is an eco-friendly technique that modifies fiber surfaces using ionized gas, improving coating adhesion without affecting bulk properties. Sol-gel technology involves the formation of a gel-like network that creates a thin, durable coating on textile surfaces. These advanced techniques significantly improve the durability, functionality, and environmental compatibility of stain-resistant finishes (Periolatto et al., 2021; Xue et al., 2019).

IX. SUPERHYDROPHOBIC AND OLEOPHOBIC FINISHES

Hydrophobic finishes are designed to repel water, whereas oleophobic finishes repel oils and low surface tension liquids. Achieving oleophobicity is more challenging due to the lower surface tension of oils, which allows them to spread more easily. Fluorocarbon-based finishes are highly effective in providing both properties; however, their environmental impact has led to increased research into fluorine-free alternatives. Superhydrophobic surfaces exhibit extreme water repellency, while oleophobic surfaces require advanced chemical formulations. The combination of both properties is essential for comprehensive stain resistance in applications such as workwear and upholstery (Kissa, 2001; Li et al., 2020).

X. MULTIFUNCTIONAL AND SMART TEXTILES

Modern textile finishing is moving toward multifunctional systems that combine stain resistance with additional properties such as antimicrobial activity, UV protection, and flame retardancy. This is achieved through the use of nanomaterials and hybrid coatings that provide multiple functionalities simultaneously. Smart textiles represent the next generation of materials that can respond to environmental stimuli such as temperature, light, and moisture. Stimuli-responsive polymers can alter their surface properties, enabling adaptive stain resistance under varying conditions. These innovations are particularly valuable in healthcare, sportswear, and protective applications (Hu et al., 2012; Verma & Sharma, 2021).

XI. TESTING AND PERFORMANCE EVALUATION

The effectiveness of stain-resistant finishes is evaluated using standardized testing methods. Water repellency is measured using spray tests, while oil repellency tests assess resistance to non-polar liquids. Stain release tests evaluate the ease of removing stains during laundering, and wash durability tests determine the longevity of the finish after repeated washing cycles. These tests are essential for quality control and for comparing the performance of different finishing technologies (Mahltig & Textor, 2019).

XII. APPLICATIONS

Stain-resistant textiles are widely used in various sectors due to their enhanced performance and convenience. In apparel, they provide easy-care properties and improved durability. In home furnishings, they are used in upholstery, carpets, and curtains to maintain cleanliness and appearance. In healthcare, stain-resistant fabrics contribute to hygiene and infection control. Protective clothing also benefits from these finishes by providing resistance to contaminants and hazardous substances (Holme, 2022).

XIII. ADVANTAGES AND LIMITATIONS

Stain-resistant finishes offer several advantages, including improved durability, reduced cleaning frequency, enhanced aesthetic appeal, and extended product lifespan. However, they also have certain limitations, such as reduced breathability, environmental concerns associated with fluorochemicals, and gradual loss of effectiveness after repeated washing. Addressing these limitations is a key focus of current research (Rastogi & Kandasubramanian, 2020; Shahidi & Wiener, 2021).

XIV. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT AND SUSTAINABILITY

The environmental impact of conventional stain-resistant finishes has become a major concern, particularly due to the persistence of fluorinated compounds. As a result, there is a growing emphasis on developing eco-friendly alternatives such as bio-based polymers and water-based formulations. Sustainable processing techniques aim to reduce water and energy consumption while minimizing chemical usage. These approaches align with global sustainability goals and regulatory requirements, promoting environmentally responsible textile production (Shahidi & Wiener, 2021).

XV. INDUSTRIAL CHALLENGES AND COMMERCIALIZATION

Despite significant advancements, several challenges remain in the commercialization of stain-resistant textiles. Ensuring uniform coating on large fabric surfaces, maintaining durability, and balancing cost and performance are major concerns. Regulatory restrictions on certain chemicals have also influenced the development of alternative finishing systems.

Scaling up nanotechnology-based processes while maintaining cost-effectiveness is another critical challenge. Continuous research and technological innovation are essential to overcome these barriers (Holme, 2022).

XVI. LIFE CYCLE ASSESSMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY

Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) is an important tool used to evaluate the environmental impact of textile finishes throughout their lifecycle. Stain-resistant finishes can reduce water and energy consumption by minimizing the need for frequent washing. However, the environmental impact of the chemicals used must also be considered. Sustainable solutions focus on biodegradable materials, reduced chemical usage, and improved recyclability, ensuring a balance between performance and environmental responsibility (Shen et al., 2022).

XVII. FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS AND RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Future research in stain-resistant textiles is focused on developing highly durable, eco-friendly, and multifunctional finishes. Advanced nanomaterials such as graphene and bio-based nanoparticles are being explored to enhance performance. Plasma and laser treatments are emerging as chemical-free alternatives for surface modification. Additionally, the integration of artificial intelligence and machine learning in textile processing is expected to optimize finishing parameters and improve product quality. These innovations aim to create textiles that are self-cleaning, sustainable, and adaptable to changing environmental conditions (Verma & Sharma, 2021; Zhang et al., 2019).

XVIII. CONCLUSION

Stain-resistant finishing is a crucial aspect of modern textile engineering, providing enhanced functionality, durability, and ease of maintenance. Continuous advancements in nanotechnology and sustainable materials are driving the development of high-performance, environmentally friendly textile finishes. These innovations are expected to play a significant role in meeting the evolving demands of consumers and industries while ensuring sustainability and environmental protection (Rastogi & Kandasubramanian, 2020).

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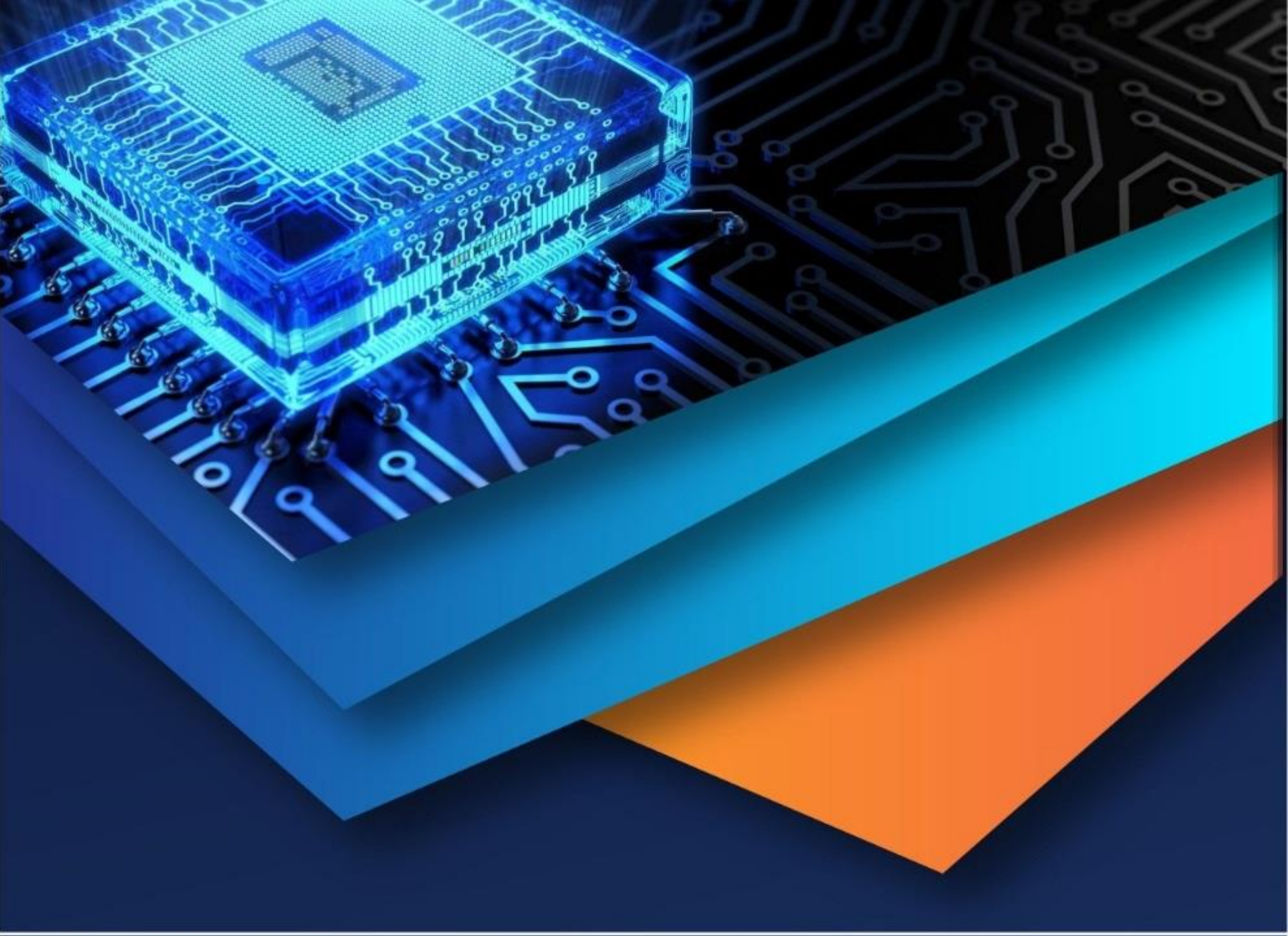

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