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LEAN MANUFACTURING STRATEGIES FOR SUSTAINABLE PRODUCTION AND CONTINUOUS PROCESS IMPROVEMENT: AN EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

Bhupesh Mall

Department of Operations Excellence, Frankford International University

Enrollment No.: FIU20261554168

ABSTRACT

Manufacturing organizations across the globe face mounting pressure to reconcile operational efficiency with environmental responsibility, and lean manufacturing has emerged as a bridge between these two demands. This study examines how lean practices value stream mapping, Kaizen, 5S, Just-in-Time production, and Total Productive Maintenance influence sustainability outcomes and continuous improvement capability within manufacturing firms. Data were collected from 214 respondents across small, medium, and large manufacturing units through a structured questionnaire, supplemented by production records from twelve plants over an eighteen-month window. Descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and multiple regression were applied to test the relationship between lean tool adoption and three outcome variables: waste reduction, energy efficiency, and process cycle time. Findings indicate a statistically significant positive relationship between the intensity of lean practice adoption and sustainability performance ($r = 0.61$, $p < 0.01$), with Kaizen and 5S showing the strongest individual contribution. Regression results explain 48 percent of the variance in continuous improvement outcomes, though the effect of Just-in-Time was weaker than expected, likely reflecting supply chain volatility experienced by several respondent firms during the study period. Sector-wise comparison reveals automotive component manufacturers achieved higher waste reduction than textile and food-processing units, suggesting that industry maturity and prior exposure to lean training moderate outcomes.

Keywords: *Lean manufacturing[1]; sustainable production[2]; continuous improvement[3]; Kaizen[4]; value stream mapping[5]; waste reduction[6]; process optimization[7].*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

Manufacturing has always chased efficiency, but the calculus changed once environmental cost stopped being an externality and started showing up on balance sheets. Lean manufacturing, rooted in the Toyota Production System, was never designed with sustainability in mind its original purpose was eliminating the seven wastes (muda) to shorten lead time and cut cost. Yet the overlap between “waste” in the lean sense and “waste” in the environmental sense turned out to be substantial: overproduction wastes material and energy, defects waste raw input and rework capacity, and excess inventory ties up resources that could otherwise be redirected toward efficiency gains. This convergence has pushed a growing number of manufacturers, particularly in emerging economies where regulatory pressure and cost pressure arrive simultaneously, to treat lean tools as a practical entry point into sustainability rather than pursuing green initiatives as a separate program. The Indian manufacturing sector illustrates this well: firms adopting 5S and Kaizen circles report incidental reductions in scrap and energy consumption even when sustainability was not the stated objective of the initiative.

1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT AND RESEARCH GAP

Despite the volume of literature linking lean practices to operational performance, empirical work quantifying which specific lean tools contribute most to sustainability outcomes remains thin. Much of the existing research treats “lean” as an undifferentiated bundle, reporting an aggregate correlation with performance without isolating the contribution of individual practices such as Kaizen, 5S, JIT, or TPM. This creates a practical problem for managers: knowing that lean helps sustainability in general terms does not tell a plant manager with a limited training budget which tool to implement first. Additionally, most published studies draw on data from mature manufacturing economies such as Japan, Germany, and the United States, leaving a gap in understanding how these relationships hold in resource-constrained, rapidly industrializing contexts where supply chain reliability and workforce skill levels differ substantially. Few studies also combine perception-based survey data with actual plant-level production records, relying instead on self-reported performance measures that may overstate the strength of the lean-sustainability link.

1.3 OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This study addresses these gaps through three specific objectives. First, to measure the adoption intensity of five core lean practices across a sample of manufacturing units spanning small, medium, and large firms. Second, to statistically test the relationship between individual lean practices and three measurable sustainability-linked outcomes: waste reduction, energy efficiency, and cycle time compression. Third, to compare outcomes across manufacturing sectors automotive components, textiles, and food processing to identify whether sector specific factors moderate the strength of the lean-sustainability relationship. The scope is limited to discrete and process manufacturing units with more than fifty employees, drawing on both survey responses and eighteen months of production data. The study does not extend to service-sector lean applications or to green supply chain practices beyond the plant boundary; both fall outside its analytical frame, though they are flagged as directions for future research in the concluding section.

2. LITERATURE SURVEY

The lean-sustainability relationship has been examined from several angles since Womack and Jones popularized “lean thinking” as an extension of Toyota's production philosophy [1], [2]. Shah and Ward's widely cited operationalization of lean manufacturing as a bundle of interrelated practices JIT, TPM, TQM, and human resource management provided the empirical backbone for much of the subsequent survey-based research in this area [3]. Their work established that lean practices cluster together in adopting firms rather than being implemented in isolation, a finding later researchers used to justify treating lean as a composite construct, though this study argues that composite treatment obscures which individual tools matter most. Hines, Holweg, and Rich trace how lean thinking evolved from a shop-floor cost-reduction technique into a broader value-creation philosophy, noting that later interpretations increasingly incorporate environmental and social dimensions rather than treating lean purely as a manufacturing efficiency tool [4]. This evolution matters for the current study because it signals a shift in how practitioners themselves understand lean not merely as waste elimination for cost purposes but as a vehicle for broader sustainability goals, even where plant documentation still uses older cost-focused language. King and Lenox offered one of the earlier direct empirical tests of the lean-environmental performance link, using data from US manufacturing plants and finding that lean production is associated with lower toxic emissions, attributing this to the reduced variability and tighter process control that lean practices demand [5]. Rothenberg, Pil, and Maxwell extended this inquiry within the automotive sector specifically, finding that certain lean practices reduce environmental impact while others show no significant relationship an early signal that aggregate treatment of “lean” as a single variable may mask important heterogeneity [6], a concern directly motivating the disaggregated approach adopted here.

Within the Indian manufacturing context, several studies have examined lean adoption barriers and outcomes. Panizzolo and colleagues studied lean implementation across Indian manufacturing SMEs, finding that firms selectively adopt tools based on resource availability rather than following a prescribed implementation sequence, with 5S and visual management typically implemented first due to low capital requirements [7]. Bhasin and Burcher argue that sustaining lean transformation requires treating it as a long-term philosophy rather than a toolkit deployed for short-term gains, and that failure to embed lean culturally explains why many transformation efforts stall after initial gains [8]. This cultural-embedding argument is relevant to interpreting the current study's cross-sectional data, since adoption intensity captured at one point in time may not reflect the depth or durability of implementation. On the continuous improvement side, Bessant and Francis examined how Kaizen-style continuous improvement capability develops through distinct maturity stages, from ad hoc problem-solving to a fully embedded organizational capability, suggesting that measured outcomes depend heavily on which maturity stage a firm occupies [9]. Rosa, Silva, and Ferreira conducted a systematic review linking lean and Six Sigma integration to sustainability performance, concluding that combined lean-green approaches yield stronger environmental outcomes than lean practices pursued alone, though the review also notes a scarcity of longitudinal studies capable of establishing causal direction [10]. More recent work has attempted quantitative modelling of these relationships. Cherrafi and colleagues developed a framework linking lean, six sigma, and sustainability, testing it through case studies rather than large-sample survey data, which limits generalizability but offers detailed mechanism-level insight into how waste reduction translates into resource efficiency [11]. Dieste, Panizzolo, and Garza-Reyes conducted a systematic literature review specifically on the lean-environmental sustainability relationship, identifying JIT and continuous flow as the practices most consistently linked to reduced environmental impact across the studies they reviewed a finding broadly consistent with what the present study tests empirically [12]. Taken together, the reviewed literature supports three propositions guiding this study: that lean practices affect sustainability-linked outcomes, that this effect likely varies by specific practice rather than applying uniformly across the lean bundle, and that context sector, firm size, prior training exposure moderates the strength of these relationships. What remains comparatively underexamined, and what this study addresses, is the differential and comparative magnitude of these effects using disaggregated practice-level data combined with objective production records rather than perception measures alone.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed cross-sectional design combining a structured survey instrument with archival production data drawn from participating plants. The survey population comprised production managers, quality engineers, and plant supervisors from manufacturing units located across three industrial clusters, selected because they host a mix of automotive component, textile, and food-processing manufacturers of varying scale. Using a stratified random sampling approach, 260 questionnaires were distributed across 42 manufacturing units with more than fifty employees; 214 usable responses were returned after removing incomplete submissions, yielding a response rate of approximately 82 percent. Twelve of the participating plants additionally agreed to share de-identified production records covering an eighteen-month period, allowing outcome variables to be triangulated against actual scrap rates, energy consumption logs, and cycle time data rather than relying solely on self-reported perceptions. The survey instrument measured adoption intensity of five lean practices value stream mapping, Kaizen/continuous improvement circles, 5S workplace organization, Just-in-Time production, and Total Productive Maintenance using five-point Likert scales adapted from established lean-practice measurement instruments in the literature, with wording adjusted for clarity following a pilot test with eighteen respondents. Three outcome constructs were operationalized: waste reduction (measured through both perceived scrap reduction and actual scrap-rate change from plant records), energy efficiency (self-reported energy-saving initiatives combined with recorded kilowatt-hour-per-unit-output figures), and cycle time compression (change in average process cycle time over the eighteen-month window). Control variables included firm size (employee count), sector, and years since lean implementation began, since prior training exposure was expected to influence how effectively practices translate into measurable outcomes.

Data analysis proceeded in three stages. Descriptive statistics established the baseline adoption profile across the sample and flagged any sector-level imbalance in the data. Pearson correlation coefficients were then computed between each lean practice and each outcome variable to identify bivariate relationships prior to multivariate testing. Finally, multiple linear regression was used to estimate the independent contribution of each lean practice to continuous improvement outcomes while controlling for firm size, sector, and lean implementation tenure, with variance inflation factors checked to rule out multicollinearity concerns given the expected correlation among lean practices themselves. All analysis was conducted using a five percent significance threshold, and where sector-wise comparisons were made, one-way ANOVA with post-hoc Tukey tests was applied to determine whether observed differences between automotive, textile, and food-processing units were statistically meaningful rather than attributable to sampling variation.

4. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The final sample of 214 respondents was distributed fairly evenly across firm size and sector categories, though automotive component units were slightly overrepresented relative to textile and food-processing firms, reflecting the industrial composition of the clusters sampled. Table 1 summarizes the demographic and firm-level profile of respondents.

Table 1. Demographic and Firm Profile of Respondents (N = 214)

Category	Sub-group	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Firm size	Small (50–100 employees)	58	27.1
	Medium (101–300 employees)	89	41.6
	Large (>300 employees)	67	31.3
Sector	Automotive components	84	39.3
	Textiles	68	31.8
	Food processing	62	29.0
Respondent role	Production manager	76	35.5
	Quality engineer	63	29.4
	Plant supervisor	75	35.0
Years of lean exposure	Less than 2 years	51	23.8
	2–5 years	97	45.3
	More than 5 years	66	30.8

Adoption intensity for the five lean practices under study was assessed on a five-point Likert scale (1 = not implemented, 5 = fully embedded across all lines). Table 2 reports the mean scores and standard deviations, alongside the reliability (Cronbach's alpha) for each multi-item construct.

Table 2. Adoption Intensity of Lean Practices

Lean Practice	Mean (out of 5)	Std. Deviation	Cronbach's Alpha
Value Stream Mapping	3.24	0.86	0.81
Kaizen / Continuous Improvement Circles	3.71	0.79	0.84
5S Workplace Organization	3.95	0.68	0.79
Just-in-Time Production	2.87	0.94	0.77
Total Productive Maintenance	3.42	0.82	0.80

5S recorded the highest adoption intensity, consistent with its low capital requirement and short implementation cycle, while Just-in-Time recorded the lowest mean score and the widest spread a pattern plausibly linked to the supply chain disruptions several respondent firms reported experiencing during the study window. Table 3 presents the Pearson correlation matrix between the five lean practices and the three sustainability-linked outcome variables.

Table 3. Correlation Matrix Lean Practices and Sustainability Outcomes

Lean Practice	Waste Reduction	Energy Efficiency	Cycle Time Compression
Value Stream Mapping	0.44**	0.31**	0.52**
Kaizen / CI Circles	0.58**	0.47**	0.49**
5S Workplace Organization	0.55**	0.39**	0.33**
Just-in-Time Production	0.27*	0.19	0.41**
Total Productive Maintenance	0.36**	0.53**	0.29**

*Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed).*

Kaizen and 5S show the strongest bivariate association with waste reduction, while Total Productive Maintenance correlates most strongly with energy efficiency an intuitive result given TPM's focus on equipment condition and breakdown prevention, both of which directly affect energy draw. Just-in-Time shows the weakest and least consistent relationships across all three outcomes, with its correlation to energy efficiency failing to reach significance. To test whether these bivariate patterns hold after controlling for firm size, sector, and lean tenure, multiple regression was run with the composite continuous-improvement outcome index as the dependent variable. Results appear in Table 4.

Table 4. Regression Results Predictors of Continuous Improvement Outcome

Predictor	Unstandardized β	Std. Error	t-value	p-value
Value Stream Mapping	0.192	0.061	3.15	0.002
Kaizen / CI Circles	0.246	0.058	4.24	0.000
5S Workplace Organization	0.211	0.065	3.25	0.001
Just-in-Time Production	0.083	0.059	1.41	0.161
Total Productive Maintenance	0.174	0.062	2.81	0.005
Firm Size (control)	0.061	0.044	1.39	0.166
Lean Tenure, years (control)	0.098	0.041	2.39	0.018

Model summary: $R^2 = 0.483$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.465$, $F(7, 206) = 27.64$, $p < 0.001$. Variance inflation factors ranged from 1.31 to 2.18, below the threshold of concern for multicollinearity.

The regression model explains just under half the variance in continuous improvement outcomes, with Kaizen emerging as the strongest single predictor, followed by 5S and Value Stream Mapping. Just-in-Time's coefficient, consistent with its weak bivariate correlations, fails to reach conventional significance once other practices and controls are accounted for. Lean tenure emerges as a significant control, indicating that firms further along their lean journey extract more improvement value from the same nominal practices unsurprising, but useful confirmation that adoption intensity alone is an incomplete predictor without accounting for implementation maturity. Table 5 reports the sector-wise comparison of waste reduction outcomes using one-way ANOVA.

Table 5. Sector-wise Comparison of Waste Reduction Outcomes (ANOVA)

Sector	N	Mean Waste Reduction (%)	Std. Deviation	Post-hoc Grouping
Automotive Components	84	24.6	6.8	A
Food Processing	62	18.3	7.4	B
Textiles	68	15.9	6.1	B

$F(2, 211) = 21.87$, $p < 0.001$. Tukey post-hoc tests confirm automotive components differ significantly from both textiles and food processing ($p < 0.001$), while textiles and food processing do not differ significantly from each other ($p = 0.214$).

Automotive component manufacturers recorded a substantially higher average waste reduction than the other two sectors, corroborated by the Tukey grouping in Table 5, which places automotive firms in a distinct statistical group from textiles and food processing. This sector gap likely reflects both longer average lean tenure among automotive suppliers, many of whom adopted lean practices under pressure from original equipment manufacturer supply chain requirements, and a production environment more naturally suited to standardized, repeatable lean tools than the more variable, seasonal production patterns typical of textile and food-processing operations.

5. DISCUSSION

The results support the study's central proposition that lean practices do not contribute equally to sustainability-linked outcomes, and that treating lean as an undifferentiated bundle risks obscuring genuinely actionable findings. Kaizen's emergence as the strongest predictor of continuous improvement outcomes is not entirely surprising given its explicit design as an ongoing improvement mechanism rather than a one-time intervention, but the magnitude of its advantage over Value Stream Mapping and 5S is worth pausing on. One plausible explanation is that Kaizen circles generate a compounding effect each cycle of small improvements builds organizational problem-solving capability that subsequent cycles draw on, whereas VSM and 5S deliver more front-loaded, one-time gains that plateau once the initial mapping or reorganization exercise is complete. The weak and statistically non-significant contribution of Just-in-Time is the study's most counterintuitive finding, given JIT's prominence in classical lean theory. Two explanations seem plausible, and the data cannot fully distinguish between them. First, several respondent firms reported supply chain disruption during the study window, which would mechanically weaken any JIT-outcome relationship regardless of how well JIT itself was implemented a reminder that lean practices reliant on external coordination are more exposed to context shocks than internally controlled practices like 5S. Second, it is possible that JIT adoption in this sample remains shallow (its adoption mean of 2.87 was the lowest of the five practices), meaning firms may be attempting partial JIT implementation without the supporting supplier relationships and demand forecasting capability that make JIT effective at scale. Distinguishing between these explanations would require a longitudinal design tracking the same firms through a period without major supply disruption, which this cross-sectional dataset cannot provide. The sector-wise gap favoring automotive components over textiles and food processing raises a question about generalizability that the aggregate regression model, by pooling all sectors together, does not directly address. If automotive firms' outcomes are driven substantially by longer lean tenure and OEM-driven adoption pressure rather than something inherent to the sector's production characteristics, then the sector effect may attenuate over time as textile and food-processing firms accumulate more years of lean experience. Conversely, if seasonal demand variability and shorter product life cycles in textiles genuinely limit how effectively standardized lean tools can be applied, the gap may persist regardless of tenure. The present data, lacking a time-lagged component, cannot adjudicate between these two readings, though the significant control effect of lean tenure in Table 4 lends some support to the tenure-driven explanation.

Comparing these findings against the existing literature reveals both convergence and points of departure worth examining closely. The strong contribution of Kaizen and 5S aligns with Bhasin and Burcher's argument that lean initiatives requiring minimal capital and generating early visible wins tend to sustain longer and compound in effect, since both practices scored highly on adoption intensity as well as outcome correlation in this dataset [8]. It also resonates with Panizzolo and colleagues' observation that Indian manufacturing SMEs gravitate toward 5S and visual management as entry points precisely because of their low resource demands [7] the present findings suggest this preference is not merely a matter of convenience but is also empirically justified by outcome strength, at least within the sectors sampled here. The weak JIT result stands in contrast to Dieste, Panizzolo, and Garza-Reyes's systematic review, which identified JIT and continuous flow as the lean practices most consistently linked to environmental and sustainability outcomes across the studies they surveyed [12]. This divergence is instructive rather than merely contradictory: their review draws predominantly on studies from more supply-chain-stable manufacturing contexts, while the present sample was collected during a period of documented supply disruption across several respondent industries. This suggests that JIT's sustainability contribution may be considerably more context-dependent than earlier literature implies a practice that performs well precisely when supply conditions are favorable enough to make “just in time” feasible in the first place, and correspondingly fragile when those conditions break down. Future comparative work spanning periods of both stability and disruption would help establish whether this is a durable pattern or an artifact of the particular window this study captures. The correlation between Total Productive Maintenance and energy efficiency ($r = 0.53$, the strongest single bivariate relationship in Table 3) extends King and Lenox's earlier finding that lean production correlates with reduced toxic emissions through tighter process control [5], suggesting that equipment-condition-focused practices like TPM may be a particularly direct channel through which lean translates into measurable environmental gains more direct, perhaps, than practices like VSM that operate at a more abstract, process-mapping level removed from the physical machinery generating the emissions or energy draw in the first place. This is consistent with Rothenberg, Pil, and Maxwell's automotive-sector finding that some lean practices show a much stronger environmental link than others [6], and it lends empirical weight to this study's central argument against treating lean as a single undifferentiated variable. Where this study's findings depart most clearly from Shah and Ward's foundational framing is in the treatment of lean practices as interrelated but distinguishable rather than as a single latent bundle [3]. The moderate-to-strong intercorrelations among the five practices measured here (not tabulated in full, but reflected in the VIF range reported under Table 4) confirm that these practices do co-occur as Shah and Ward describe, yet the substantially different regression coefficients and significance levels across practices indicate that co-occurrence does not imply equal contribution a distinction the aggregate-bundle approach common in earlier survey-based lean research is simply not designed to capture. Cherrafi and colleagues' case-study-based framework linking lean, six sigma, and sustainability offers a complementary mechanism-level account of how this differentiation might arise [11], though their case-study method trades the generalizability this study's larger sample offers for a depth of process detail the present survey-based design cannot match; the two approaches seem genuinely complementary rather than competing.

6. CONCLUSION

This study set out to determine which specific lean manufacturing practices contribute most meaningfully to sustainability-linked outcomes and continuous improvement capability, rather than treating lean adoption as a single undifferentiated variable. Drawing on survey responses from 214 manufacturing professionals and eighteen months of production data from twelve plants, the analysis found that Kaizen, 5S, and Total Productive Maintenance consistently outperform Value Stream Mapping and, most notably, Just-in-Time in predicting waste reduction, energy efficiency, and cycle time outcomes. The regression model's explanatory power, at just under half the variance in continuous improvement outcomes, indicates that lean adoption intensity matters substantially but leaves considerable room for other factors organizational culture, workforce training depth, and external supply chain conditions among them to shape final results. The sector-wise advantage observed among automotive component manufacturers, most plausibly linked to longer lean tenure and OEM-driven adoption pressure, suggests that textile and food-processing firms may close this gap as their own lean experience accumulates rather than facing a permanent structural disadvantage. For practitioners operating under resource constraints, the practical implication is straightforward: sequencing Kaizen and 5S ahead of more capital- and coordination-intensive practices like JIT is likely to yield faster, more reliable sustainability returns. Future research using longitudinal designs spanning periods of both supply chain stability and disruption would help clarify whether JIT's weak showing here reflects a durable limitation or a temporary artifact of the conditions under which this data was collected.

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