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From Kaizen Philosophy to Operational Reality: An Empirical Analysis of the Implementation of Japanese Continuous Improvement in an Emerging Economy

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Abstract

This study provides an empirical analysis of the implementation of continuous improvement practices within Nestlé Waters Algérie, using a process approach and Lean tools such as DMAIC methodology and performance monitoring systems. The findings reveal significant improvements in key metrics, including Overall Equipment Effectiveness (OEE), downtime reduction, and productivity.

Nevertheless, the results indicate that these gains are mainly driven by process standardization and performance measurement rather than a deep integration of Kaizen philosophy. The study highlights a gap between the cultural foundations of continuous improvement and their operational application in an emerging economy context.

These findings emphasize the importance of organizational and cultural dimensions for ensuring the sustainability and effectiveness of continuous improvement initiatives.

Keywords: Kaizen, Continuous Improvement, Lean Management, Process Approach, Overall Equipment Effectiveness (OEE).
JEL Classification Codes: M11, D23, L23, M14

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1. Introduction

1.1. Context: Diffusion of Continuous Improvement Practices and Performance Challenges

In an economic environment characterized by increasing competition and rapid transformation of production systems, organizations are facing a growing need to continuously improve their operational performance. This dynamic is reinforced by globalization and the evolution of customer expectations in terms of quality, cost, and delivery.

In this context, continuous improvement approaches derived from Lean management and Kaizen philosophy have been widely adopted at an international scale. Several recent studies confirm their significant impact on organizational performance, particularly in terms of waste reduction, quality improvement, and process optimization (Bhamu & Sangwan, 2014; Tortorella et al., 2020).

Recent research also shows that the integration of Lean practices leads to significant improvements in operational performance, notably through increased productivity and reduced cycle times (Sony, Antony & Naik, 2020). Furthermore, performance indicators such as Overall Equipment Effectiveness (OEE) have become a standard tool for evaluating production system performance (Muchiri & Pintelon, 2008).

However, despite their widespread diffusion, several studies highlight that the results of Lean practices vary significantly depending on organizational contexts, particularly in emerging economies, where structural and cultural constraints may limit their effectiveness (Netland & Ferdows, 2016; Tortorella & Fettermann, 2018).

1.2. Research Problem and Objectives

Despite the growing diffusion of continuous improvement practices and Lean approaches worldwide, a recurring observation emerges from the literature: the adoption of tools and methods does not necessarily lead to sustainable organizational transformation. In other words, the implementation of Lean practices does not guarantee the emergence of a genuine continuous improvement culture.

Foundational works in quality management have emphasized that continuous improvement relies on an integrated approach combining technical, organizational, and human dimensions. In this regard, Deming highlights the central role of management and organizational culture in the success of quality initiatives, while Juran stresses the importance of planning, control, and continuous improvement within a systemic framework. Similarly, Ishikawa underlines the importance of employee involvement and the development of quality circles as key conditions for effective continuous improvement.

Building on these contributions, Kaizen philosophy, as developed by Imai, is based on a dynamic of continuous and incremental improvement involving all organizational actors. It is not limited to the use of tools but is rooted in a cultural approach emphasizing collective learning, employee empowerment, and continuous improvement in daily activities.

However, several recent studies point out a gap between these principles and their actual implementation in organizations. Many companies adopt Lean tools such as DMAIC, process standardization, and performance monitoring systems, primarily aiming at short-term productivity gains (Bhamu & Sangwan, 2014; Sony et al., 2020). This approach leads to what can be described as an “instrumental” adoption of Lean, focused on tools rather than on the cultural dimension of Kaizen (Netland, 2016; Tortorella et al., 2020).

The works of Bessant and Francis (1999) and Anand et al. (2009) demonstrate that sustainable performance improvement depends on the ability of organizations to develop collective learning routines and to embed continuous improvement practices into daily operations. Without this integration, performance gains tend to remain temporary and difficult to sustain.

This issue is particularly relevant in emerging economies, where organizational constraints, hierarchical structures, and management practices may limit the effective adoption of continuous improvement principles (Tortorella & Fettermann, 2018). In such contexts, quality initiatives are often oriented toward short-term performance objectives, which may hinder the development of a true Kaizen culture.

In this context, the central research question of this study is formulated as follows:

To what extent does the implementation of continuous improvement practices in an emerging economy reflect a genuine adoption of Kaizen philosophy beyond the use of tools?

To address this question, this study is based on a case study conducted within Nestlé Waters Algeria. The analysis relies on operational performance data, including the evolution of Overall Equipment Effectiveness (OEE), downtime reduction, quality improvement, and productivity gains, as well as on the use of Lean tools such as the DMAIC methodology.

The objectives of this research are twofold:

- To evaluate the impact of continuous improvement practices on operational performance through quantitative indicators;
- To analyze the limitations of their implementation by identifying the gap between Kaizen philosophy and its operational translation in an emerging economy context.

Thus, this study aims to provide a critical analysis of the transfer of Japanese continuous improvement models, highlighting the conditions required for their sustainable adoption and effectiveness in specific organizational environments. In this perspective, this study is based on a conceptual model aiming to analyze the relationships between Lean practices, organizational factors, and operational performance.

More specifically, the following research hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Lean practices have a positive and significant effect on operational performance.
H2: Organizational factors positively influence operational performance.
H3: Organizational factors mediate the relationship between Lean practices and operational performance.
H4: The adoption of Lean tools does not necessarily lead to a full integration of Kaizen philosophy.

These hypotheses are further developed in the literature review and empirically tested in the following sections.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Continuous Improvement and the Process Approach

Continuous improvement is a fundamental principle of quality management, aimed at continuously enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of organizational processes. It is based

on a logic of ongoing progress, oriented toward customer satisfaction and the control of overall organizational performance. According to normative frameworks and traditional quality management approaches, an organization is viewed as a system composed of interdependent processes, whose overall performance depends on their coherence and control.

In this perspective, the process approach constitutes a structuring lever for performance management. It consists of identifying, analyzing, and improving activities by considering them as value-creating processes. Process analysis makes it possible to distinguish value-added activities from those generating waste, with the objective of optimizing flows and improving output quality. This approach promotes a transversal vision of the organization and strengthens coordination between different functions.

The PDCA cycle (Plan-Do-Check-Act), formalized by Deming, provides the operational foundation for continuous improvement. It structures quality initiatives around four complementary phases: planning actions, implementing them, verifying results, and adjusting practices. This improvement loop fosters continuous organizational learning and enhances process control.

Furthermore, corrective and preventive actions play a central role in regulating quality systems. Corrective actions aim to eliminate the root causes of non-conformities in order to prevent their recurrence, while preventive actions aim to anticipate potential failures. This logic contributes to reducing the cost of non-quality and improving process reliability.

2.2. Kaizen and Japanese Quality Philosophy

Kaizen, introduced and developed by Imai, represents a comprehensive approach to continuous improvement based on the ongoing and collective involvement of all organizational actors. Unlike radical change approaches, Kaizen emphasizes incremental and continuous improvements embedded in daily practices.

This philosophy is based on several key principles, including employee empowerment, collective participation, continuous improvement at the workplace (Gemba), and systematic waste elimination (muda). It also relies on organizational mechanisms that promote team involvement, such as quality circles, which enable employees to actively contribute to problem-solving and process improvement.

The work of Ishikawa further strengthened this approach through the development of problem-solving tools such as the cause-and-effect diagram, which helps identify root causes of operational issues. Similarly, Juran emphasizes the importance of a structured managerial approach to quality, based on planning, control, and continuous improvement of processes.

Thus, Kaizen should not be considered merely as a set of tools, but rather as a true organizational culture based on employee engagement, communication, and collective learning.

2.3. Lean Management and Operational Performance

Lean management extends Kaizen philosophy by providing a structured approach aimed at improving operational performance through waste elimination and process optimization. It is based on the principle of value creation for the customer, achieved by reducing non-value-added activities and improving flow efficiency.

In this context, Lean tools such as Value Stream Mapping, DMAIC methodology, and Failure Mode and Effects Analysis (FMEA) help identify sources of inefficiency and implement targeted improvement actions. These tools rely on a data-driven approach, supporting fact-based decision-making.

One of the key performance indicators in Lean systems is the Overall Equipment Effectiveness (OEE), which evaluates the global efficiency of equipment by integrating availability, performance, and quality dimensions. Improving OEE is a central objective of continuous improvement initiatives, reflecting better process control and reduced operational losses.

However, several studies point out that Lean implementation often remains limited to a technical application of tools, without full integration of the cultural dimension associated with Kaizen. This instrumental approach may reduce the impact of continuous improvement initiatives by limiting their scope to short-term operational gains.

2.4. Limitations of Transferring the Japanese Model to Emerging Economies

The international diffusion of continuous improvement practices raises the question of their adaptability to the organizational and cultural contexts of emerging economies. Differences in management culture, organizational structures, and quality system maturity can significantly influence the outcomes of continuous improvement initiatives.

In such contexts, organizations often adopt a tool-oriented approach, focusing on performance indicators, process standardization, and short-term productivity gains. This orientation may lead to a partial adoption of the Kaizen model, characterized by weak integration of cultural and human dimensions.

Moreover, several factors may hinder the effective implementation of quality initiatives, including resistance to change, limited employee involvement, insufficient training systems, and difficulties in communicating change. These elements highlight the importance of organizational and managerial dimensions in the success of continuous improvement projects.

Thus, the transfer of the Japanese model requires adaptation to local specificities in order to ensure a balanced integration of tools, practices, and organizational culture. This reflection constitutes the starting point of the present research, which aims to analyze the conditions for the effective implementation of continuous improvement in an emerging context.

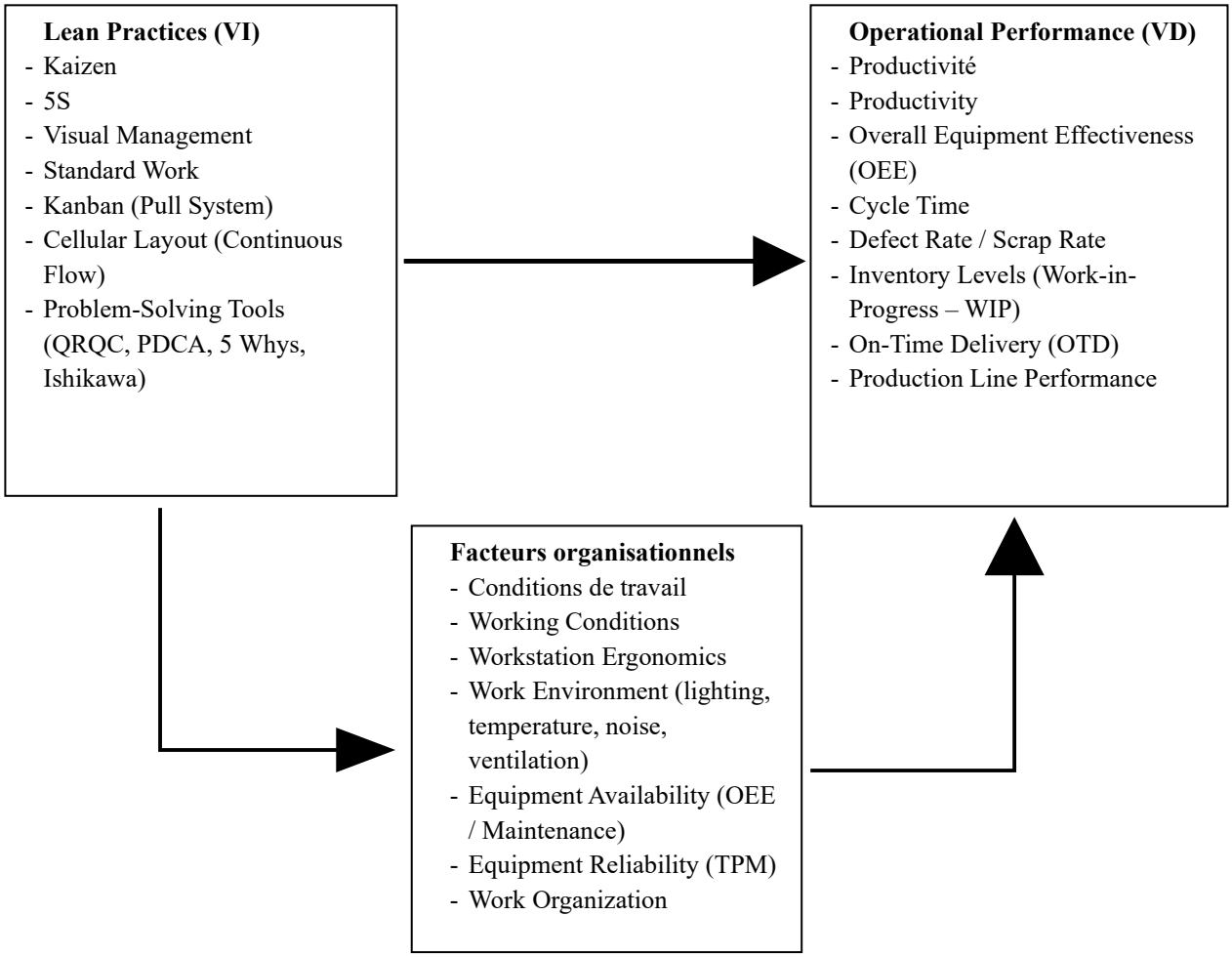
2.5. Conceptual Model of the Research

To extend the insights developed in the literature and to structure the empirical analysis, a conceptual model is proposed. This model aims to synthesize the relationships between Lean continuous improvement practices, organizational factors, and operational performance.

Previous studies show that Lean practices such as Kaizen, 5S, standard work, and Kanban contribute to improving process performance by reducing waste and optimizing flows (Womack & Jones, 1996; Liker, 2004). However, several studies highlight that their effectiveness strongly depends on the organizational context in which they are implemented (Bessant & Francis, 1999; Anand et al., 2009).

In this perspective, the proposed model highlights a direct relationship between Lean practices and operational performance, measured through key indicators such as Overall Equipment Effectiveness (OEE), productivity, quality, and delivery performance. It also incorporates an indirect relationship mediated by organizational factors and working conditions, which influence the effective implementation and appropriation of continuous improvement practices (Tortorella & Fettermann, 2018).

Fig 1. Conceptual Model of the Relationship Between Lean Practices and Operational Performance



Source: Prepared by the researcher

The proposed model highlights a dual mechanism of influence. On the one hand, Lean practices directly contribute to improving operational performance through process optimization and waste reduction. On the other hand, their impact is conditioned by organizational factors, such as working conditions, ergonomics, communication, and employee involvement, which play a critical role in their effective implementati on and appropriation.

This model therefore reveals a potential gap between the use of continuous improvement tools and the actual integration of Kaizen philosophy, which constitutes the core research issue of this study.

2.6 Research Hypotheses

Based on the proposed conceptual model and existing literature in quality management and Lean management, several research hypotheses are formulated to analyze the relationships between Lean practices, organizational factors, and operational performance.

Previous studies in Lean management show that the use of continuous improvement tools such as Kaizen, 5S, and standard work contributes significantly to process performance improvement by reducing waste and optimizing flows (Womack & Jones, 1996; Liker, 2004).

H1: Lean practices have a positive and significant effect on operational performance.

Furthermore, several studies highlight that the effectiveness of continuous improvement initiatives strongly depends on organizational conditions, including working environment, employee involvement, and managerial practices (Bessant & Francis, 1999; Anand et al., 2009).

H2: Organizational factors positively influence operational performance.

In addition, the literature suggests that organizational factors play a mediating role in the relationship between Lean practices and performance, by influencing their implementation and effectiveness (Tortorella & Fettermann, 2018).

H3: Organizational factors mediate the relationship between Lean practices and operational performance.

Finally, several studies point out a gap between the use of Lean tools and the actual integration of Kaizen philosophy, particularly in emerging economies.

H4: The adoption of Lean tools does not necessarily lead to a full integration of Kaizen philosophy.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Methodological Choice

This research adopts an empirical approach aimed at analyzing the implementation of continuous improvement practices within a real organizational context. Given the objective of the study, which is to understand how Kaizen philosophy is translated into practice within a specific environment, a case study approach was considered particularly appropriate.

The case study method allows for an in-depth understanding of organizational dynamics, managerial practices, and operational outcomes associated with continuous improvement initiatives. It provides a detailed and contextualized analysis of the interactions between tools, processes, and actors.

In this context, the research relies on a mixed-method approach combining qualitative and quantitative analyses. The qualitative component focuses on examining organizational practices and the implementation of Lean tools, while the quantitative component is based on the analysis of performance indicators used to assess the impact of continuous improvement actions.

3.2. Description of the Case Study

The empirical study was conducted within Nestlé Waters Algérie, an industrial company operating in the agri-food sector. This organization was selected due to its active engagement in continuous improvement initiatives and its implementation of Lean practices aimed at optimizing production performance.

The company provides a relevant field of analysis, as it has implemented several structured continuous improvement initiatives, particularly through the use of Lean management methodologies. These initiatives aim to enhance operational performance, reduce waste, and improve product quality.

The studied context is also characterized by an emerging economy environment, which presents specific organizational and cultural features that may influence the implementation of quality

management practices. This dimension allows for an analysis of how Kaizen principles are transferred and adapted in a context different from their original environment.

3.3. Methods and Analytical Tools

The analysis is based on the application of Lean continuous improvement tools, as well as on the exploitation of performance indicators to assess the outcomes of implemented actions.

a) Continuous Improvement Approach

The improvement approach primarily relies on the DMAIC methodology (Define, Measure, Analyze, Improve, Control), which is widely used in process improvement projects. This structured method enables organizations to systematically address problems, from their identification to the implementation of sustainable solutions.

In addition, several complementary tools were used, including:

- Value Stream Mapping (VSM), to identify sources of waste and analyze production flows;
- Problem-solving tools, to identify root causes of operational issues;
- Performance monitoring systems, to measure the impact of implemented improvement actions.

b) Performance Indicators

The evaluation of results is based on the analysis of key performance indicators (KPIs), used to measure the effectiveness of continuous improvement initiatives.

The main indicator used in this study is the Overall Equipment Effectiveness (OEE), which measures the overall performance of equipment by integrating three dimensions :

- Equipment availability;
- Production performance;
- Product quality.

The analysis also includes:

- Machine downtime, used to evaluate production interruptions;
- Quality rates, measuring product conformity levels;
- Productivity indicators, such as revenue per employee.

These indicators allow for a quantitative assessment of the evolution of operational performance following the implementation of continuous improvement initiatives.

c) Statistical Analysis

To strengthen the robustness of the results, a multivariate statistical analysis was conducted, particularly through Principal Component Analysis (PCA). This method allows identifying relationships between performance variables and to highlight correlations between productivity, quality, and overall performance.

PCA provides a synthetic interpretation of the data and helps identify the key factors influencing performance, complementing the operational analysis of the indicators.

The conceptual model and the associated research hypotheses guide the empirical analysis conducted in this study. The statistical analysis aims to test the relationships between Lean practices, organizational factors, and operational performance, as defined in the research model.

4. Results

4.1. Evolution of Operational Performance

The implementation of continuous improvement initiatives within Nestlé Waters Algérie led to a significant improvement in key operational performance indicators.

The analysis of Overall Equipment Effectiveness (OEE) highlights a progressive improvement in equipment performance. OEE increased from 0.67 to 0.76, reflecting better control of production processes and a reduction in operational losses. This evolution indicates a simultaneous optimization of the three OEE components: equipment availability, production performance, and product quality.

In addition, machine downtime significantly decreased, from 10.9% to 5.4%, representing a reduction of nearly 50%. This improvement demonstrates the effectiveness of the actions implemented to reduce production interruptions and enhance process continuity.

In terms of quality, the results show a stabilization of the product conformity rate at a high level, reaching 99.4%, indicating a substantial reduction in defects and improved process control.

Finally, the analysis of productivity reveals an increase in revenue per employee, reflecting an improvement in overall production system efficiency. This evolution indicates better resource utilization and enhanced individual and collective performance.

4.2. Impact of Continuous Improvement Practices

The observed results highlight the positive impact of continuous improvement tools and methods on operational performance. The use of the DMAIC methodology, combined with Value Stream Mapping and performance monitoring systems, enabled a structured approach to improvement and facilitated the identification of sources of inefficiency.

Process analysis made it possible to :

- Identify waste-generating activities;
- Reduce variability in production operations;
- Improve flow efficiency;
- Strengthen performance monitoring through relevant indicators.

These actions contributed to an overall improvement in process efficiency by reducing losses and increasing the value-added of activities.

4.3. Analysis of Relationships Between Performance Variables

The Principal Component Analysis (PCA) reveals strong correlations between the studied variables.

The results show:

- A correlation of 0.96 between process performance and productivity;
- A correlation of 0.92 between continuous improvement practices and overall performance.

These findings confirm that process improvement constitutes a key driver of competitiveness and organizational performance.

4.4. Summary of Results

Overall, the findings highlight a significant improvement in operational performance following the implementation of continuous improvement initiatives.

These improvements are reflected in:

- An increase in OEE;
- A reduction in machine downtime;
- An improvement in product quality;
- An increase in productivity.

These results confirm the effectiveness of the tools and methods used to enhance process performance. However, they also underline the need for a deeper analysis of how these practices are implemented, in order to better understand the underlying factors driving these improvements and their potential limitations.

To complement the analysis of the results, the research hypotheses derived from the conceptual model can be evaluated in light of the empirical findings.

The results show a significant improvement in operational performance indicators, particularly through the increase in Overall Equipment Effectiveness (OEE), the reduction of downtime, and the enhancement of productivity. These findings confirm the positive impact of Lean practices on operational performance.

- H1 is therefore validated.

Furthermore, the analysis highlights the influence of organizational conditions on performance outcomes, particularly through work organization, equipment availability, and production conditions.

- H2 is also validated.

The results also indicate that the effectiveness of Lean practices strongly depends on the context in which they are implemented, confirming the mediating role of organizational factors in the relationship between Lean practices and operational performance.

- H3 is validated.

Finally, the qualitative analysis reveals a gap between the use of Lean tools and the actual integration of Kaizen philosophy, as the observed improvements are mainly driven by tools and methods rather than by a deep cultural transformation.

-H4 is therefore confirmed.

5. Discussion

The results obtained confirm the hypotheses derived from the conceptual model, highlighting both the effectiveness of Lean practices and the limitations related to their cultural integration.

5.1. Performance Improvement Driven by Tools and Process Structuring

The results highlight a significant improvement in operational performance following the implementation of continuous improvement practices. The increase in OEE, the reduction in downtime, the improvement in product quality, and the growth in productivity confirm the effectiveness of Lean tools in optimizing processes.

These findings are consistent with previous studies on Lean management, which emphasize the role of process structuring tools in reducing waste and enhancing performance. The use of the

DMAIC methodology, combined with Value Stream Mapping and performance monitoring systems, has strengthened process control and improved performance visibility.

Thus, the observed improvements appear to be closely linked to a logic of process standardization, formalization of practices, and data-driven management, enabling better regulation of activities and reduction of variability. These findings therefore support H1, confirming the positive impact of Lean practices on operational performance.

5.2. A Partial Adoption of Kaizen Philosophy

However, beyond these positive results, the analysis reveals a gap between the fundamental principles of Kaizen and their operational implementation. Indeed, the observed improvements seem to be primarily driven by tools and methodologies rather than by a deep transformation of organizational culture.

Kaizen philosophy, as developed by Imai, is based on collective involvement, continuous daily improvement, and employee empowerment at all levels of the organization. In the studied case, however, the approach appears to be more structured around formal improvement projects rather than a spontaneous and continuous improvement dynamic embedded in daily practices.

This situation reflects an instrumental adoption of Lean, focused on tools rather than on the cultural and behavioral dimensions of Kaizen. The results therefore confirm that the implementation of continuous improvement practices alone does not guarantee the emergence of a true quality culture. This observation confirms H4, highlighting the gap between the use of Lean tools and the actual integration of Kaizen philosophy.

5.3. The Role of Organizational and Cultural Factors

The gap observed between operational results and the adoption of Kaizen philosophy highlights the critical role of organizational and cultural factors in the success of continuous improvement initiatives.

Several elements may explain this situation, including:

- A strong focus on short-term productivity gains;
- Limited employee involvement in improvement initiatives;
- An emphasis on performance indicators rather than collective dynamics;
- Managerial practices that do not fully encourage autonomy and initiative among teams.

These findings are consistent with the work of Ishikawa and Juran, who emphasized the importance of employee engagement and management commitment in the development of a quality culture.

In emerging economies, these factors may be further reinforced by specific organizational constraints, such as hierarchical structures, management styles, and internal communication practices, which influence the adoption and sustainability of continuous improvement practices. These findings also support H2 and H3, emphasizing the critical role of organizational factors and their mediating effect on the relationship between Lean practices and operational performance.

5.4. Research Contribution

This study contributes to the literature by providing a critical analysis of the transfer of Japanese continuous improvement models into emerging economies. It empirically demonstrates that

performance improvements are primarily tool-driven, while the cultural dimension of Kaizen remains only partially integrated.

It highlights that:

- Operational performance can be significantly improved through Lean tools and process structuring;
- However, these improvements do not necessarily reflect a full adoption of Kaizen philosophy;
- The success of continuous improvement initiatives depends on the integration of both technical and cultural dimensions.

Thus, this research emphasizes the need to move beyond a purely instrumental approach to Lean by integrating human, organizational, and cultural factors into continuous improvement strategies.

5.5. Managerial Implications

The findings of this study also provide important implications for practitioners. Organizations seeking to implement continuous improvement practices should pay particular attention to cultural dimensions and employee involvement.

Beyond the use of tools, it is essential to:

- Develop a continuous improvement culture at all levels of the organization;
- Encourage employee participation in problem identification and resolution;
- Adapt managerial practices to foster initiative and learning;
- Integrate quality practices into daily operations rather than limiting them to isolated improvement projects.

These elements constitute key conditions for ensuring the sustainability and effectiveness of continuous improvement initiatives in emerging contexts.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Summary of Findings

This study aimed to analyze the implementation of continuous improvement practices in an emerging economy context, focusing on the extent to which Kaizen philosophy is effectively adopted beyond the use of tools. Based on a case study conducted within Nestlé Waters Algérie, the analysis revealed significant improvements in operational performance.

The results demonstrate a clear increase in Overall Equipment Effectiveness (OEE), a substantial reduction in downtime, an improvement in product quality, and a noticeable increase in productivity. These developments reflect better process control and confirm the effectiveness of continuous improvement tools in optimizing operational performance.

However, beyond these positive outcomes, the study highlights a gap between the philosophical foundations of Kaizen and their operational implementation. The observed improvements appear to be mainly driven by process structuring, standardization of practices, and performance monitoring systems rather than by a deep transformation of organizational culture. These findings therefore validate the research hypotheses, confirming both the positive effect of Lean practices on operational performance and the existence of a gap between the use of Lean tools and the actual integration of Kaizen philosophy.

6.2. Contributions and Limitations of the Study

This research contributes to the literature by offering a critical perspective on the transfer of Japanese continuous improvement models to emerging economies. It demonstrates that while Lean tools can significantly improve operational performance, these improvements do not necessarily translate into the development of a true continuous improvement culture.

The study emphasizes the importance of integrating both technical and cultural dimensions in the implementation of quality management practices. It shows that the success of continuous improvement initiatives depends not only on the use of tools but also on employee involvement, managerial practices, and organizational dynamics.

However, this research has certain limitations. It is based on a single case study, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the analysis focuses primarily on operational performance indicators and does not fully incorporate variables related to organizational behavior or corporate culture.

6.3. Future Research Directions and Managerial Recommendations

The findings of this study open several avenues for future research. It would be relevant to extend the analysis to other organizations and sectors in order to compare different approaches to implementing continuous improvement practices across various contexts. Furthermore, incorporating indicators related to organizational culture, employee engagement, and managerial practices would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing the success of quality initiatives.

From a managerial perspective, this study highlights the need for organizations to move beyond a purely tool-based approach to Lean. It is essential to develop a continuous improvement culture based on employee involvement, empowerment, and collective learning.

Therefore, the successful transfer of the Kaizen model to emerging economies requires adapting practices to local specificities and integrating human and cultural dimensions into continuous improvement initiatives.

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