

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT AND GROWTH OF ENERGY FIRMS IN RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA

Sekibo, C. C.

Department of Business Administration, Faculty of Administration and Management, Rivers State University, Nkpolu-Oroworukwo, Port Harcourt, Nigeria

Email: christian.sekibo@ust.edu.ng

and

Bagshaw, K. B.

Department of Business Administration, Faculty of Administration and Management, Rivers State University, Nkpolu-Oroworukwo, Port Harcourt, Nigeria

Email: bagshaw.karibo@ust.edu.ng

ABSTRACT

The study examined the relationship between continuous improvement and growth of energy firms in Rivers State, Nigeria. The measures of growth used are market share, service quality and customer satisfaction. The study adopted a cross-sectional survey research design. The target population was the 24 energy firms in Rivers State as obtained from the updated directory of finelib.com. However, the study elements were 72 which comprised managers from the operations, human resource and marketing departments of the respective 24 construction firms. The study adopted a census sampling technique since the population of the study was relatively small. Data for the study was collected through a structured questionnaire, while the four-point Likert scale was used to measure the responses from the respondents. Data was analysed using the Spearman's Rank Order Correlation Coefficient Statistics technique was used to test the hypotheses with the aid of Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 27. The results of the study showed that there is a significant positive relationship between resource planning and the measures of project performance. The study concludes that continuous improvement has a strong relationship with growth of energy firms in Rivers State, Nigeria. The study therefore recommends amongst others that energy firms in Rivers State should institutionalize a culture of continuous improvement across all operational and service departments. Regularly reviewing processes, incorporating employee suggestions, and benchmarking against best practices can drive innovation and operational excellence.

Keywords: Continuous improvement, customer satisfaction, growth, market share, service quality

INTRODUCTION

The growth of organizations - defined through indicators such as market share, service quality, and customer satisfaction - remains a central goal for firms striving to remain competitive in an increasingly dynamic global marketplace. Growth is not merely a function of expansion in physical size or revenue but a multidimensional outcome reflecting an organization's ability to

increase its market penetration, retain loyal customers, and enhance the quality of services offered. In today's business environment, firms are continuously under pressure to outperform rivals by improving their value propositions and operational efficiency to ensure sustainable growth (Gorondutse & Hilman, 2016).

In the context of energy firms, particularly in developing economies like Nigeria, growth is both a strategic necessity and a developmental imperative. However, available evidence suggests that many energy firms in Rivers State and similar environments face persistent challenges in attaining sustainable growth due to service delivery lapses, low customer retention, and inefficient internal processes (Okafor & Obi, 2020; Nwachukwu & Uzoechi, 2022). Although multiple growth strategies have been implemented—ranging from aggressive marketing to infrastructural expansion—the impact has often been short-lived or suboptimal. A review of recent literature reveals inconsistent findings regarding what specific internal management practices consistently drive sustained growth in these firms (Eze, Ebere, & Amah, 2021). This inconsistency highlights a notable gap in empirical knowledge regarding how internal quality-driven strategies such as continuous improvement influence the key dimensions of organizational growth.

Continuous improvement, a core tenet of Total Quality Management (TQM), refers to an ongoing effort to enhance products, services, or processes incrementally over time. It entails a systematic and sustained approach to evaluating and enhancing organizational procedures to eliminate inefficiencies, reduce waste, and deliver better value to customers (Oakland, 2014; Jaca et al., 2012). Within the TQM framework, continuous improvement is not only concerned with making changes but with cultivating a culture of adaptability and performance excellence across all levels of the organization. It involves the active participation of employees, process evaluation, feedback loops, and the use of performance data to guide decisions (Deming, 1986; Prajogo & Sohal, 2003).

Despite the criticality of continuous improvement, its specific contribution to organizational growth measures such as market share, service quality, and customer satisfaction remains under-examined, particularly within the Nigerian energy sector. While global studies (e.g., Deming, 1986; Jaca et al., 2012) affirm the strategic role of continuous improvement in enhancing firm competitiveness, few empirical investigations have localized this discourse to energy firms in Rivers State or measured how these improvements translate to tangible growth outcomes. This raises important questions about the contextual effectiveness of continuous improvement practices in environments marked by regulatory complexity, infrastructural constraints, and volatile market demands (Olayemi & Fagbenle, 2018).

This study, therefore sought to fill this gap by empirically examining the relationship between continuous improvement and organizational growth within energy firms in Rivers State, Nigeria.

The specific objectives of the study include.

1. To examine the relationship between continuous improvement and market share in energy firms in Rivers State, Nigeria.
2. To determine the relationship between continuous improvement and service quality in energy firms in Rivers State, Nigeria.
3. To ascertain the relationship between continuous improvement and customer satisfaction in energy firms in Rivers State, Nigeria.

Conceptual Framework

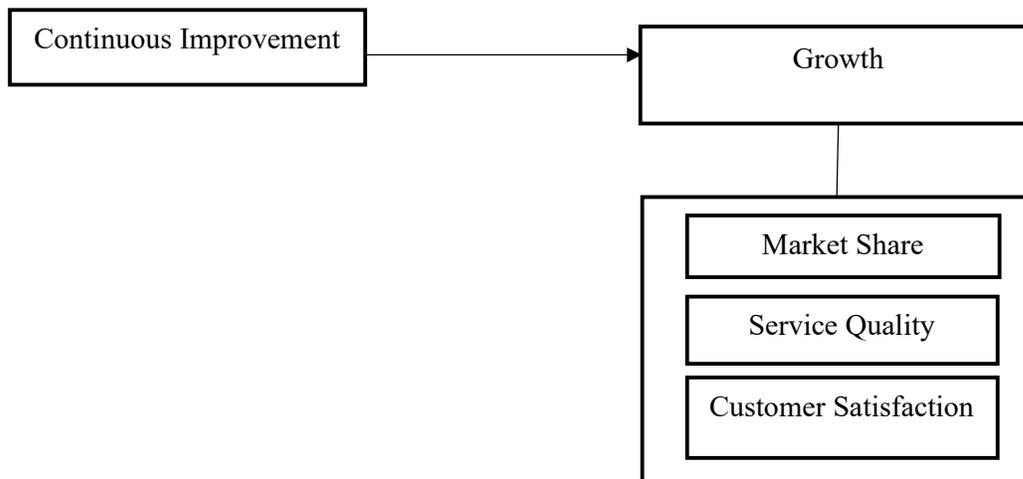


Figure 1: The relationship between Continuous Improvement and Growth

Source: Desk Researcher (2025) – with dimensions sourced from (Merino, 2003) and measures sourced from (Silas, 2018; Okonkwo & Ugochukwu, 2019).

Research Questions

The Research questions are as follows

1. What is the relationship between continuous improvement and market share in energy firms in Rivers State, Nigeria?
2. What is the relationship between continuous improvement and service quality in energy firms in Rivers State, Nigeria?
3. What is the relationship between continuous improvement and customer satisfaction in energy firms in Rivers State, Nigeria?

Research Hypotheses

The research hypotheses are as follows

1. There is no significant relationship between continuous improvement and market share in energy firms in Rivers State, Nigeria.
2. There is no significant relationship between continuous improvement and service quality in energy firms in Rivers State, Nigeria.
3. There is no significant relationship between continuous improvement and customer satisfaction in energy firms in Rivers State, Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Foundation

Theory of Total Quality Management (TQM)

Deming's Theory of Total Quality Management (Deming, 1986) is a cornerstone for understanding the principles and practices of Total Quality Management (TQM). This theory emphasizes the role of continuous improvement, customer satisfaction, and leadership in fostering a culture of quality within organizations. Deming introduced the Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) cycle, a systematic framework for problem-solving and process optimization, which has become a fundamental tool in quality management practices worldwide (Chin, 1995).

Building on Deming's principles, Crosby (1979) advanced the idea of "quality is free," arguing that investing in quality processes reduces overall costs by minimizing errors and waste. He

emphasized the philosophy of “zero defects” and posited that a commitment to excellence must permeate every organizational level. Similarly, Juran (1989) highlighted the importance of quality planning, quality control, and quality improvement as integral components of organizational success. Juran's emphasis on aligning customer needs with business objectives provided a comprehensive framework for achieving long-term competitive advantage.

Conceptual Review

Concept of Continuous Improvement

Continuous Improvement (CI) is a cornerstone of modern management practices, aiming to enhance processes, products, and services incrementally over time. Rooted in methodologies like Lean, Six Sigma, and Total Quality Management (TQM), CI has evolved to incorporate digital tools, sustainability goals, and strategic alignment. CI is traditionally viewed as a systematic, ongoing effort to enhance organizational processes. Bhuiyan and Baghel (2005) define CI as "a culture of sustained improvement targeting the elimination of waste in all systems and processes of an organization." This perspective emphasizes waste reduction and efficiency. Similarly, Bessant *et al* (1994) describe CI as "a company-wide process of focused and continuous incremental innovation," underscoring its role in fostering innovation through small, frequent improvements. The advent of Industry 4.0 has influenced CI practices, integrating digital technologies to enhance process optimization. Vinodh *et al* (2021) discuss the integration of CI strategies with Industry 4.0, highlighting the role of digital tools in facilitating real-time data analysis and decision-making. This fusion allows organizations to achieve significant improvements in efficiency and responsiveness.

Concept of Growth

Abolarinwa *et al* (2020) examined the impact of growth strategies on the performance of quoted manufacturing firms in Nigeria. They found that internal growth strategies, such as aggressive profit retention and new product development, positively influenced economic performance, including returns on assets and equity. This perspective underscores the importance of strategic planning in fostering growth. Okwuise *et al* (2021) focused on small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Delta State, Nigeria, highlighting the role of strategic management in organisational growth. Their study revealed that grand strategies, differentiation strategies, and strategic alliances significantly impacted organisational development. This approach emphasises the need for deliberate strategic actions to achieve growth. Odunayo (2022) investigated the effect of human capital development on firm growth in Lagos State's manufacturing companies. The study found that investment in employee training and development positively affected organisational growth, suggesting that human capital is a critical driver of business expansion.

Measures of Growth

Market Share

Market share, according to **Porter (1980)**, is often considered a key indicator of a firm's competitive strength and market dominance. His definition, however, has evolved through various interpretations, with scholars adapting his foundational insights to changing market dynamics, especially in the digital age. Smith and Collins (2022) argue that market share serves as a benchmark for evaluating business success, often linked with profitability and growth. They posit that the concept of market share is not static but shifts in meaning based on external factors, such as the introduction of disruptive technologies or changes in consumer behavior. In the traditional sense, market share is defined by the ratio of a company's sales to the total sales in a market over a defined period. According to Kotler and Keller (2020), this definition remains widely accepted in most industries, with an emphasis on sales volume and revenue as

central metrics. Kotler and Keller (2020) further highlight that market share is often used as a performance metric, with a direct correlation between higher market share and better financial performance. The authors argue that companies with greater market share tend to benefit from economies of scale, enhanced market power, and increased brand recognition.

Customer Satisfaction

Globally, customer satisfaction has been widely defined and studied in both academic and practical contexts. According to Kotler and Keller (2021), customer satisfaction is the feeling of pleasure or disappointment that results from comparing a product's perceived performance to customer expectations. This definition highlights that satisfaction is a psychological state that arises after experiencing a product or service. Oliver (2021) further elaborates on this by emphasizing that customer satisfaction is a judgment about the service or product received relative to the customer's expectations. Moreover, Zeithaml *et al* (2020) propose that satisfaction is a key outcome of service encounters and that customers are satisfied when the service or product meets or exceeds their expectations. They argue that satisfaction is an emotional response, and factors such as product quality, service quality, and customer service significantly influence it.

Empirical Review

Koval *et al* (2018) examined whether companies are able to improve customer satisfaction through the application of continuous improvement and, second, to identify what organizational practices are able to facilitate the impact of CI on CS. To test the developed assumptions, the study used the structural equation modeling technique. The data for analysis were collected from 304 service companies via a custom web-survey. The research confirms the direct positive impact of CI on CS. Further, the study demonstrates that management commitment and rewards system that encourages employees to participate in CI play the major facilitating role in improving CS through CI. These practices accompanied by quality-oriented culture and employee training in the improvement tools provide necessary infrastructure to sustain CI in the companies over time. Additionally, regardless of the vital role of goal setting for CI established in previous research, the proposed study finds a limited ability of goal setting, as compared to other organizational practices, to facilitate CI–CS relationship.

Also, Bernal-Torres *et al* (2021) examined the impact of continuous improvement (system and teams) on business sustainability dimensions (social, environmental, operational, and financial) as a competitive strategy to create value for all stakeholders in emerging economy context. The data collected is from 120 companies of different sizes and 13 different industrial sectors such as food, energy, health, financial services, and logistics in Colombia. The design of multivariate logistic regression is to identify the critical aspects of the continuous improvement practices that significantly affect the dimensions of business sustainability. The study shows that from continuous improvement aspects (system and teams), employee involvement, human talent maintenance, training, and evaluation accompanied by feedback impact business sustainability. These elements impact financial and operational dimensions significantly but in the environmental and social aspects with less intensity.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a cross-sectional research design. The target population of this study was twenty-four (24) energy firms registered. Participants of the study were selected in line with the unit of analysis which is the organization level study. By virtue of the aforesaid, three (3) representatives from each of the twenty-four (24) energy firms were chosen to make up the

study elements. This included managers from the operations manager, human resource manager and marketing managers of the respective twenty-four (24) energy firms. These participants were chosen because it is in that cluster we have those who have the knowledge, intellect and official capacity to respond to the research instrument because some of the responses are not issues commonly dealt with every cadre of staff nor departments in the organization, rather those who are privy to corporate matters are deemed as most qualified to do so. However, the study elements will be (72) which consist of managers from the operations, human resource and marketing departments of the respective 24 energy firms.

Census sampling method was adopted because the target population of the study was relatively small. The main data collection instrument for the study was structured questionnaire. A total of seventy-two (72) copies of questionnaires were distributed, retrieved and eventually used for the study. Data was analysed using inferential statistics such as the Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient with the aid of Statistical Package for Social Science version 29.0 for the purpose of examining the nature and proposed association.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Decision rule: The decision rule which applies for all bivariate test outcomes is stated as follows: where $P < 0.05$, reject hypothesis on the basis or evidence significant relationship; and where $P > 0.05$, accept hypothesis on the basis of insignificant relationship between the variables. The extent of influence is on this basis assessed using the rho interpretations provided by Bryman and Bell (2003).

Table 1: Description on Range of correlation Pearson values and the corresponding level of association

Range of Pearson with positive and negative sign values	Strength of Association
$\pm 0.80 - 0.99$	Very Strong
$\pm 0.60 - 0.79$	Strong
$\pm 0.40 - 0.59$	Moderate
$\pm 0.20 - 0.39$	Weak
$\pm 0.00 - 0.19$	Very Weak

Source: Adopted from Ahaiauzu & Asawo, 2016, *Advance Social Research Methods*

The positive (+) sign in the values of (*B*) indicates a positive relationship, while the negative (-) sign in the value of (*B*) indicates an indirect/negative or inverse relationship. Thus, the sign of the *B* explains the direction of association between the two variables. The above table forms our yardstick for the determination of the level of relationship between the variables of the dimensions and those of the measures as understudied. These relationships range from very weak to very strong.

Table 2: Correlations matrix between continuous improvement and the measures of organizational growth

		Improve	Market Share	Service Quality	Customer Satisfaction
Improve	Pearson	1	.884**	.863**	.709**
	Correlation				
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.000
	N	72	72	72	72
Share	Pearson	.884**	1	.753**	.551**
	Correlation				
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000	.002
	N	72	72	72	72
Quality	Pearson	.863**	.753**	1	.395*
	Correlation				
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		.031
	N	72	72	72	72
Satisfy	Pearson	.709**	.551**	.395*	1
	Correlation				
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.002	.031	
	N	72	72	72	72

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Source: Research Data, 2025

H01: There is no significant relationship between continuous improvement and market share of energy firms in Rivers State, Nigeria.

The table 2 showed a positive and significant relationship between continuous improvement and market share of energy firms in Rivers State, Nigeria with a Pearson value of 0.884. This indicates that there is a very high strength in correlation between both variables. This shows a very strong relationship between continuous improvement and market share of energy firms in Rivers State, Nigeria. However, since the probability statistics shows a value of 0.000, which is less than 0.05, at 95% confidence interval for which the calculations were made, therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected, and its alternative form accepted. This states that “there is significant relationship between continuous improvement and market share of energy firms in Rivers State, Nigeria”.

H02: There is no significant relationship between continuous improvement and service quality of energy firms in Rivers State, Nigeria.

The table 2 shows a positive and significant relationship between continuous improvement and service quality of energy firms in Rivers State, Nigeria with a Pearson value of 0.863. This indicates that there is a very high strength in correlation between both variables. This shows a very strong relationship between continuous improvement and service quality of energy firms in Rivers State, Nigeria. However, since the probability statistics shows a value of 0.000, which is less than 0.05, at 95% confidence interval for which the calculations were made, therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected, and its alternative form accepted. This states that “there is significant relationship between continuous improvement and service quality of energy firms in Rivers State, Nigeria”.

Ho3: There is no significant relationship between continuous improvement and customer satisfaction of energy firms in Rivers State, Nigeria.

The table 2 shows a positive and significant relationship between continuous improvement and customer satisfaction of energy firms in Rivers State, Nigeria with a Pearson value of 0.709. This indicates that there is a high strength in correlation between both variables. This shows a strong relationship between continuous improvement and customer satisfaction of energy firms in Rivers State, Nigeria. However, since the probability statistics shows a value of 0.000, which is less than 0.05, at 95% confidence interval for which the calculations were made, therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected, and its alternative form accepted. This states that “there is significant relationship between continuous improvement and customer satisfaction of energy firms in Rivers State, Nigeria”.

Discussion of Findings

The first, second and third hypotheses sought to examine the relationship between continuous improvement and growth of energy firms in Rivers State. Hence it was hypothesized that there is no significant relationship between continuous improvement and growth of energy firms in Rivers State. These hypotheses (Ho1, Ho2 and Ho3) were tested using the Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient. The study findings reveal that continuous improvement has a strong positive and significant relationship with market share, service quality and customer satisfaction in energy firms in Rivers state, Nigeria.

These findings corroborate with Izionworu (2023) who posits that Continuous improvement in TQM involves iterative enhancements to processes, products, and services, aiming to increase efficiency and responsiveness to customer needs. In the context of energy firms in Rivers State, implementing continuous improvement practices has been linked to enhanced market share. A study by on oil and gas servicing companies in Port Harcourt highlighted that firms adopting TQM practices, including continuous improvement, experienced improved service delivery, which likely contributed to increased market share. Similarly, research by KariKari *et al* (2024) found that TQM practices, encompassing continuous improvement, positively correlated with customer satisfaction and quality conformance, which are critical factors influencing market share.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

The basis of the findings of this study concludes that continuous improvement has a positive strong relationship with the market share of energy firms in Rivers State, Nigeria. This means that as energy firms in River State, Nigeria increase continuous improvement activities, there will be increase in their market share. Also, it is affirmed that continuous improvement has a positive strong relationship with service quality of energy firms in Rivers State, Nigeria, which entails that as energy firms in River State, Nigeria increase continuous improvement activities, there will be increase in their market share. Furthermore, it is affirmed that continuous improvement has a positive strong relationship with customer satisfaction of energy firms in Rivers State, Nigeria, which entails that as energy firms in River State, Nigeria increase continuous improvement activities, there will be increase in their customer satisfaction.

Based on the relationship from the findings, the following recommendations were proffered:

- i. Energy firms should implement continuous improvement initiatives such as lean process redesign, Six Sigma quality control, and employee-driven innovation to reduce operational inefficiencies and enhance product/service offerings.

- ii. Management should adopt a structured approach to continuous improvement by regularly collecting and analyzing customer feedback, auditing internal service processes, and training staff to meet evolving quality standards.
- iii. Firms should embed customer-focused continuous improvement strategies into all operational layers—ensuring that customer needs and complaints directly inform product development, service delivery, and after-sales support.

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