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AI-driven process control for micro/nano-fabrication of sustainable devices: Technologies, challenges, and future directions

Md Fazly Rabbi Ahad *, Jakiya Sultana, Md. Ariful Islam and Md. Habibur Rahman Nayeem

Department of Apparel Manufacturing Management and Technology, Shanto Mariam University of Creative Technology.

Abstract

This paper explores the integration of AI-driven process control in micro- and nano-fabrication to advance the development of sustainable devices. It highlights the critical role of AI technologies in optimizing fabrication processes, enhancing precision, and reducing waste, thereby addressing key challenges in scalability and environmental impact. The study also examines current technological barriers and proposes future directions for leveraging AI to enable smarter, more efficient manufacturing paradigms in the sustainable device landscape. These insights aim to accelerate innovation and promote eco-friendly production methods in the evolving micro/nano-fabrication domain.

Keywords: AI-Driven Process Control; Micro/Nano-Fabrication; Sustainable Device Manufacturing; Precision Optimization; Eco-Friendly Production

1. Introduction

With the advent of artificial intelligence, the domain of micro/nano-fabrication for sustainable device development is undergoing a transformative shift characterized by unprecedented precision and adaptability. Against this backdrop, this article investigates the technologies, challenges, and future directions of AI-driven process control in micro/nano-fabrication, emphasizing its paramount importance in advancing sustainable solutions for the modern era.

1.1. Background and Motivation

The micro/nano-fabrication sector, foundational to numerous advanced technologies, faces increasing pressure to integrate efficiency with ecological responsibility. Conventional manufacturing processes, particularly in semiconductor and micro-electromechanical systems (MEMS) production, are often resource-intensive and generate substantial waste [1][2]. The demand for miniaturized, high-performance devices continues to escalate, concurrently amplifying environmental concerns related to energy consumption, material usage, and waste disposal [3][4]. For instance, lithography and etch processes in semiconductor manufacturing contribute significantly to total CO_2 equivalent emissions, accounting for approximately 45% in N3 logic node wafer fabrication [2].

Artificial Intelligence (AI), encompassing machine learning (ML) and deep learning (DL), presents transformative capabilities for optimizing complex industrial processes [5]. By enabling real-time data analysis, predictive modeling, and autonomous decision-making, AI can significantly enhance manufacturing precision, reduce defects, and improve resource utilization [6][7]. The potential for AI-driven process control to minimize waste, lower energy consumption, and facilitate the adoption of sustainable materials positions it as a critical enabler for green micro/nano-fabrication[8][3]. This integration moves beyond mere efficiency gains, addressing systemic environmental challenges inherent in traditional fabrication methods and supporting the development of a circular economy [9]. For example, AI can facilitate the use of biodegradable materials and low-carbon footprint techniques in the production of disposable

* Corresponding author: Md Fazly Rabbi Ahad

devices, which is particularly relevant in sectors like point-of-care diagnostics facing significant environmental issues from plastic waste [10][11].

1.2. Scope and Objectives

This paper scrutinizes the application of AI-driven process control within the micro/nano-fabrication domain, specifically focusing on its contributions to the development of sustainable devices. The primary objective is to systematically analyze how AI technologies can optimize fabrication processes to reduce environmental footprints, enhance material efficiency, and support the integration of eco-friendly materials. It also evaluates the socioeconomic and environmental implications arising from this technological convergence.

The analysis encompasses several key areas:

- Identification of specific AI technologies (e.g., machine learning, deep learning, computer vision) applicable to micro/nano-fabrication process control [5].

- Examination of sustainable manufacturing principles and their applicability at micro/nano-scales, including zero-waste strategies and biodegradable material adoption [10][3].

- Assessment of current integration strategies for AI in manufacturing, focusing on process diagnostics, predictive maintenance, and quality control.

- Evaluation of the tangible benefits, such as improved yield, accuracy, and efficiency, resulting from AI implementation [7].

- Elucidation of the challenges associated with widespread adoption, including data quality, scalability, and ethical considerations [12][13].

By addressing these points, this paper seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the transformative potential of AI in fostering a more sustainable future for micro/nano-fabrication.

1.3. Structure of the Paper

The paper is organized into five main sections. Following this introduction, the Methodology section details the systematic approach used for literature review and analysis. The Literature Review and Thematic Analysis section presents an in-depth examination of relevant AI technologies, sustainable fabrication principles, and their integration within micro/nano-manufacturing contexts. This section also explores the socioeconomic and environmental implications. Subsequently, the Analysis and Discussion section critically assesses the technological opportunities, performance advancements, and extant challenges in implementing AI-driven process control. It further discusses the broader implications for sustainable manufacturing ecosystems, encompassing policy and ethical considerations. Finally, the Conclusion summarizes key findings, offers recommendations for future research and practice, and provides an outlook on the trajectory of AI-driven sustainable device fabrication.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

This paper employs a systematic literature review methodology, augmented by a thematic analysis approach, to synthesize existing knowledge on AI-driven process control for sustainable micro/nano-fabrication. The systematic review ensured a comprehensive and unbiased collection of relevant academic and industrial publications. A structured search protocol was developed, utilizing predefined keywords and inclusion/exclusion criteria to identify pertinent studies from reputable scientific databases [8][14][15]. This process involved multiple stages: initial keyword search, title and abstract screening, full-text review, and data extraction. The thematic analysis then allowed for the identification, analysis, and interpretation of recurring patterns and core concepts across the selected literature, facilitating a nuanced understanding of the interdependencies between AI, micro/nano-fabrication, and sustainability [16]. The integration of these two methods provides a robust framework for evaluating both the breadth and depth of research in this evolving field.

2.2. Data Sources and Selection Criteria

The literature search was primarily conducted using Scopus and Web of Science databases, recognized for their extensive coverage of scientific and engineering publications [8]. The search strategy combined terms related to

"Artificial Intelligence," "Machine Learning," "Deep Learning," "Process Control," "Microfabrication," "Nanofabrication," "Sustainable Manufacturing," "Green Manufacturing," "Circular Economy," and "Environmental Impact." Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to refine search queries, ensuring comprehensive coverage while maintaining specificity. The initial search yielded a substantial number of articles, which were then subjected to rigorous selection criteria.

Inclusion criteria focused on peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, and reviews published between 2010 and 2023, specifically addressing the application of AI in micro/nano-scale manufacturing or sustainable aspects of device fabrication. Studies that discussed theoretical frameworks, empirical investigations, or comparative analyses were prioritized. Exclusion criteria involved articles outside the specified publication period, those not directly relevant to micro/nano-fabrication or AI-driven control, and purely conceptual papers without empirical or theoretical grounding. This meticulous selection process, which resulted in 442 articles for comprehensive review in one instance, ensured the relevance and quality of the synthesized information [8].

2.3. Analytical Framework

The analytical framework adopted for this paper is multi-faceted, drawing upon systems thinking and techno-economic assessment principles. It systematically categorizes and evaluates the identified literature across three interconnected dimensions: technological capabilities, sustainability outcomes, and implementation challenges. For technological capabilities, the framework assesses the sophistication of AI algorithms, their integration into fabrication workflows, and their impact on process parameters such as yield, precision, and throughput. This includes examining applications of AI in areas like predictive maintenance and quality control [6].

Regarding sustainability outcomes, the framework evaluates the extent to which AI-driven processes contribute to reduced energy consumption, minimized material waste, lower emissions, and the adoption of eco-friendly materials. Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) principles are implicitly considered to gauge environmental impact comprehensively, often highlighting opportunities for resource efficiency [3][2][17]. Finally, the framework analyzes implementation challenges, including issues related to data quality, standardization, scalability, and economic viability [13]. This comprehensive analytical lens allows for a balanced assessment of the opportunities and obstacles inherent in AI-driven sustainable micro/nano-fabrication.

3. Literature Review and Thematic Analysis

3.1. AI Technologies in Process Control for Micro/Nano-Fabrication

The application of Artificial Intelligence within micro/nano-fabrication process control is rapidly evolving, offering advanced capabilities for automation, optimization, and defect reduction. AI algorithms can process vast amounts of complex data generated during manufacturing, translating them into actionable insights for improved process stability and efficiency [5]. These technologies move beyond traditional statistical process control, enabling predictive modeling and real-time adjustments that significantly enhance manufacturing outcomes. The semiconductor industry, for example, generates immense datasets from diverse sources like sensors, inspection tools, and metrology equipment, making it an ideal candidate for AI-driven optimization [5].

AI's utility spans the entire fabrication workflow, from design optimization and material selection to real-time process monitoring and post-production quality assurance. Machine learning models, in particular, excel at identifying subtle deviations from desired parameters, predicting potential equipment failures, and recommending optimal control settings [6]. This proactive approach reduces scrap rates, minimizes rework, and extends the lifespan of expensive equipment, all of which contribute to more sustainable operations. The next subsections delve into specific AI paradigms that are particularly relevant to this domain.

3.1.1. Deep Learning and Machine Learning Approaches

Machine learning (ML) and deep learning (DL) algorithms have demonstrated considerable utility in micro/nano-fabrication process control. ML approaches, such as Support Vector Machines (SVMs), Random Forests, and Artificial Neural Networks (ANNs), are employed for classification, regression, and pattern recognition tasks [18][19]. These models can learn complex relationships between process parameters (e.g., temperature, pressure, chemical concentrations) and output characteristics (e.g., device performance, defect rates). For instance, ML models can predict the outcome of a lithography step based on various input parameters, allowing for real-time parameter adjustments to maintain quality [5].

Deep learning, a subset of ML involving neural networks with multiple hidden layers, offers enhanced capabilities for extracting intricate features from large, unstructured datasets, such as images or time-series data. Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs) are particularly effective for image-based defect detection and classification in manufacturing processes like Additive Manufacturing (AM) . A real-time deep CNN model achieved 94% accuracy and 96% specificity in classifying the quality of an AM process in five grades, demonstrating the potential for automated, non-contact quality control . Similarly, recurrent neural networks (RNNs) and their variants (e.g., LSTMs) are well-suited for analyzing sequential data, enabling predictive maintenance for complex fabrication equipment [20]. The efficacy of these models, however, depends significantly on data quality, underscoring the need for robust data acquisition and management strategies [13].

3.1.2. Computer Vision and Data Analytics Applications

Computer vision (CV) systems provide non-contact inspection, high repeatability, and relatively low cost, making them increasingly popular for quality control (QC) in manufacturing. In micro/nano-fabrication, CV systems equipped with high-resolution cameras and advanced image processing algorithms can detect minuscule defects, measure critical dimensions, and verify component alignment with high precision. For instance, a robust MV system can perform comparative dimensional inspection on diversely shaped samples, determining parameters like perimeter, area, rectangularity, and circularity, then calculating a likeness score to identify defective products. This capability is crucial for maintaining tight tolerances characteristic of micro/nano-devices and reducing manufacturing inconsistencies. Multi-image control charts, which fuse multiple images or combine single-image control charts, have also been shown to outperform traditional single-image methods in detecting various surface-related process shifts [21][22].

Beyond visual inspection, data analytics, driven by ML, plays an essential role in extracting actionable insights from the massive datasets generated in fabrication facilities. This includes anomaly detection, root cause analysis, and process optimization. By analyzing sensor data, equipment logs, and production metrics, data analytics can identify subtle patterns indicative of impending failures or suboptimal process conditions [5]. Such insights empower engineers to implement proactive interventions, minimizing downtime and improving overall equipment effectiveness. The integration of data analytics with process control systems enables a shift from reactive problem-solving to predictive and prescriptive manufacturing strategies, significantly enhancing both efficiency and sustainability.

3.2. Sustainable Device Fabrication: Principles and Approaches

Sustainable device fabrication is gaining momentum as manufacturers recognize the environmental and economic imperatives of reducing their ecological footprint. This involves a holistic approach that considers the entire life cycle of a device, from raw material extraction and processing to manufacturing, use, and end-of-life management [3][1]. Key principles include minimizing resource consumption, reducing hazardous waste generation, employing renewable energy sources, and designing for recyclability or biodegradability. The manufacturing sector, with its significant demands on energy, water, and materials, holds substantial opportunities for reducing its environmental impact through green manufacturing practices [8][3].

The European Green Deal, for example, articulates ambitions for a climate-neutral and circular economy by 2050, emphasizing innovations to protect human and environmental health, including addressing challenges posed by hazardous chemicals [23]. This global push for sustainability influences micro/nano-fabrication by encouraging the adoption of cleaner production technologies and materials. For instance, additive manufacturing (AM) is a crucial component of smart manufacturing and offers pathways to sustainability, particularly through material efficiency and design optimization [15].

3.2.1. Zero-Waste and Green Manufacturing Techniques

Zero-waste and green manufacturing techniques represent a paradigm shift towards minimizing waste generation and environmental harm throughout the production cycle. In micro/nano-fabrication, this translates to optimizing processes to reduce material scrap, recover and reuse byproducts, and minimize energy consumption [3]. For instance, advanced process control can reduce the consumption of process chemicals, solvents, and water, which are often used in large quantities in cleaning and etching steps. The semiconductor industry, for example, is actively exploring methods to reduce the environmental impact of lithography and etch, which together account for a substantial portion of CO_2 equivalent emissions [24][2].

Green manufacturing also encompasses the design of products for longevity, repairability, and end-of-life recovery [3]. This includes implementing closed-loop systems where materials are recycled or biodegraded, thereby preventing them from entering landfills. Additive manufacturing, while offering sustainability benefits through material efficiency, still

presents social impacts and challenges related to fabrication and business models [16]. Strategies for sustainable digital fabrication processes, including those for Digital Musical Instruments (DMIs), are being developed, focusing on sustainable products and practices. The concept of integrated Techno-Ecological Systems (TES) extends this further by including ecosystems in life cycle assessments, accounting for their resource usage and remediating effects, such as fine particle capture by forests in sawn timber production [25].

3.2.2. Material Selection: Biodegradable and Low-Cost Alternatives

The choice of materials profoundly impacts the sustainability profile of micro/nano-devices. Traditional electronics often rely on non-renewable resources and materials that pose significant environmental challenges at their end-of-life, contributing to the growing problem of e-waste [1]. A shift towards biodegradable, biocompatible, and low-cost materials is paramount for advancing sustainable device fabrication. Examples include polymers derived from renewable sources, paper-based substrates, and transient electronics designed to degrade harmlessly after use [10][11].

Biodegradable polymers, for instance, are being explored for applications in controlled-release nanosized pesticide systems, demonstrating stability and controlled release capabilities under specific conditions [11][26]. Similarly, the development of "green" electronic devices fabricated from renewable or biodegradable materials, using low-energy and low-cost methods, addresses concerns about scarce elements, toxic materials, and energy usage [1]. Two-dimensional (2D) materials are also promising for clinical examination of various compounds and cancer biomarkers due to their cost-effectiveness, high sensitivity, and miniaturization aptitude [18]. The successful integration of these alternative materials often necessitates novel fabrication techniques that can handle their unique properties while maintaining device performance. AI can facilitate this by optimizing processing parameters for these new materials, ensuring quality and performance comparable to conventional counterparts.

3.3. Integration of AI in Micro/Nano-Scale Manufacturing Processes

Integrating AI into micro/nano-scale manufacturing processes represents a significant advancement towards achieving higher efficiency, reliability, and sustainability. This integration transforms traditional, often manual, and reactive control systems into intelligent, predictive, and adaptive frameworks. The proliferation of Industrial Internet of Things (IIoT) sensors in manufacturing provides a rich data environment, which, when coupled with AI, unlocks unprecedented opportunities for process optimization [5][8]. AI-driven systems can analyze vast quantities of data from various stages of fabrication, identify complex correlations, and make autonomous decisions to refine operations. This capability is particularly advantageous in environments where precision and minimal variability are critical, such as semiconductor manufacturing. The medical device sector, with its strict regulatory frameworks and quality assurance requirements, also benefits from AI integration to enhance productivity and precision [27][6].

The primary areas of AI integration include advanced process diagnostics, predictive maintenance, and real-time quality control. These applications not only improve operational metrics but also contribute directly to sustainability goals by reducing waste, energy consumption, and material usage. For instance, by anticipating equipment failures, AI minimizes unscheduled downtime and the associated resource waste. Similarly, real-time quality monitoring ensures that products meet specifications from the outset, reducing the need for costly rework or scrap .

3.3.1. Process Diagnostics and Predictive Maintenance

AI-driven process diagnostics and predictive maintenance (PdM) are transformative in micro/nano-fabrication, moving beyond reactive maintenance strategies. Traditional maintenance often incurs significant costs and production losses due to unexpected equipment failures. AI models, particularly those based on machine learning and deep learning, can analyze continuous streams of sensor data from manufacturing equipment—such as temperature, vibration, pressure, and current—to detect anomalies and predict impending failures [20]. For example, a multi-head encoder–decoder temporal convolutional network (MH-ED-TCN) achieved 97.2% accuracy in anticipating nozzle clogging in Fused Deposition Modeling (FDM) additive manufacturing by processing time-series sensor data [20].

This predictive capability enables maintenance activities to be scheduled precisely when needed, minimizing unscheduled downtime, extending equipment lifespan, and optimizing resource allocation. By avoiding catastrophic failures, the consumption of spare parts and energy associated with restarting processes is reduced, contributing directly to sustainability. Furthermore, AI can identify suboptimal operating conditions that, while not leading to immediate failure, reduce efficiency or increase energy consumption. This allows for proactive adjustments to process parameters, ensuring continuous optimal performance and resource efficiency [5]. A framework supporting continuous

improvement for production process reliability and product throughput has been proposed, integrating tools like Six Sigma DMAIC and FMEA to define, measure, and analyze failures.

3.3.2. Quality Control and Real-Time Monitoring

Quality control (QC) in micro/nano-fabrication is paramount, given the stringent requirements for precision and reliability. AI-driven systems revolutionize QC by providing real-time, in-line monitoring and defect detection capabilities that far surpass traditional manual or sampling-based methods [6][28]. Computer vision, coupled with deep learning, is particularly effective for automated optical inspection (AOI), enabling rapid and accurate identification of surface defects, dimensional inaccuracies, and functional anomalies at micro and nano scales. For instance, machine vision systems offer noncontact inspection, high repeatability, and relatively low cost, successfully performing comparative dimensional inspection on various products.

AI models can learn from vast datasets of acceptable and defective products, classifying new samples with high accuracy . This real-time feedback loop allows for immediate process adjustments, preventing the propagation of defects and significantly reducing scrap rates. In additive manufacturing, a deep convolutional neural network model achieved high accuracy in grading the quality of the fused deposition modeling process, enabling automated quality control and potentially stopping the process to eliminate sophisticated inspection of printed parts for internal defects . The ability to detect and rectify issues instantaneously enhances overall product quality, minimizes material waste, and lowers energy consumption associated with re-manufacturing or disposing of faulty components. AI-powered QA systems also provide adaptive learning capabilities, continuously enhancing performance through feedback and adapting to changing regulatory needs, particularly in sectors like medical device manufacturing [6].

3.4. Socioeconomic and Environmental Impacts of AI-driven Fabrication

The integration of AI into micro/nano-fabrication processes generates significant socioeconomic and environmental impacts. From an economic perspective, AI promises substantial cost reductions and efficiency gains, reshaping industry competitiveness. Environmentally, it offers pathways towards more sustainable manufacturing practices by optimizing resource use and minimizing waste. The convergence of Industry 4.0 technologies, including AI, with sustainable manufacturing principles represents a transformative force in the industrial sector [8]. This integration has the capacity to enhance production while morally impacting sustainable development, particularly in manufacturing, which has a vital influence on environmental, social, and economic aspects of sustainability due to its substantial demands on resources [8].

However, these advancements also introduce complexities. Socioeconomic implications involve changes in workforce skill requirements, potential job displacement, and the need for new educational frameworks. Environmental considerations extend to the energy consumption of AI data centers and the ethical sourcing of raw materials for advanced devices. A holistic assessment of these impacts is crucial for guiding responsible technological development and policy formulation, ensuring that the benefits of AI-driven fabrication are maximized while mitigating potential negative consequences.

3.4.1. Economic Feasibility and Cost Reduction

AI-driven process control offers substantial economic benefits for micro/nano-fabrication through enhanced efficiency and cost reduction. By optimizing production parameters, minimizing material waste, and reducing energy consumption, AI directly lowers operational expenditures. For instance, predictive maintenance prevents costly unscheduled downtime and repairs, while real-time quality control reduces scrap rates and rework, which are significant cost drivers in high-precision manufacturing [6]. A proposed framework for production reliability and throughput improvement aims to decrease production lead time and increase product throughput with reduced expenditures.

The ability of AI to learn from data and continuously improve process performance leads to higher yields and more consistent product quality, translating into increased revenue and market competitiveness. For example, optimizing lithography and etch processes in semiconductor manufacturing to reduce gas consumption and improve wafer material stacks can directly decrease CO_2 equivalent emissions, which also presents an economic advantage as environmental regulations tighten [2][29]. Although initial investment in AI infrastructure and data management systems can be significant, the long-term returns through improved efficiency, resource savings, and enhanced product quality often justify the expenditure. This economic feasibility drives broader adoption and further innovation in sustainable fabrication practices.

3.4.2. Sustainability Metrics and Life Cycle Assessment

Measuring the sustainability of AI-driven micro/nano-fabrication requires robust metrics and comprehensive life cycle assessment (LCA). LCA provides a standardized framework for evaluating the environmental impacts of a product or process throughout its entire life cycle, from raw material acquisition to end-of-life disposal [3][30]. In the context of AI-driven fabrication, LCA helps quantify reductions in energy consumption, greenhouse gas emissions, water usage, and hazardous waste generation. For instance, a bottom-up model using tool data, process recipes, and integrated wafer process flows can quantify the environmental impact of manufacturing IC chips, identifying areas with the highest CO_2 equivalent emissions, such as lithography and etch [2].

Beyond traditional LCA, there is a growing recognition of the need for integrated techno-ecological systems (TES) that account for the environmental contributions of ecosystems alongside industrial processes [25]. This extended view recognizes that ecosystems provide resources and absorb emissions, influencing overall environmental sustainability. Furthermore, sustainability metrics must evolve to include social indicators and considerations for renewable energy in scheduling and process planning [3]. AI can assist in collecting and analyzing the vast data required for detailed LCA and TES, providing precise measurements of environmental performance and identifying areas for further optimization. The development of advanced LCA tools, such as stochastic multiattribute LCA (SMA-LCIA), allows for a more sensitive evaluation of trade-offs between various environmental criteria, making the assessment more responsive to decision-maker preferences [30].

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1. Technological Opportunities and Performance Advancements

The integration of AI into micro/nano-fabrication processes unlocks substantial technological opportunities, leading to significant performance advancements across various operational metrics. AI-driven systems transcend the limitations of traditional control mechanisms by offering predictive capabilities, real-time adaptability, and autonomous optimization. This translates into tangible benefits suchabilities, real-time adaptability, and autonomous optimization. This translates into tangible benefits such as enhanced precision, increased throughput, and a marked reduction in defects. The inherent complexity of micro/nano-fabrication, involving numerous interdependent parameters and delicate material interactions, makes it an ideal domain for AI application. For example, the interplay of lithography, etching, and other steps in semiconductor manufacturing creates a complex system where AI can identify subtle correlations and optimize parameters beyond human intuition.

These advancements contribute to a more efficient and sustainable manufacturing paradigm. By minimizing waste and optimizing resource utilization, AI directly supports environmental goals. Concurrently, improvements in yield and product quality bolster economic competitiveness and reduce the overall cost of advanced devices. The continuous learning capability of AI models further ensures that processes can adapt to new materials, designs, and environmental considerations, fostering ongoing innovation in sustainable micro/nano-fabrication.

4.1.1. Improvement in Yield, Accuracy, and Efficiency

AI-driven process control demonstrably enhances yield, accuracy, and overall efficiency in micro/nano-fabrication. Yield improvement stems from AI's ability to predict and prevent defects in real time. Machine learning models, trained on extensive datasets of process parameters and corresponding quality outcomes, can identify subtle deviations that may lead to faults [5]. This allows for proactive adjustments, minimizing the production of defective parts. For instance, a deep convolutional neural network achieved 94% accuracy in grading quality for fused deposition modeling, offering an automated, consistent, and non-contact quality control signal that can prevent further material waste by stopping the process if necessary .

Accuracy is heightened through the precise control afforded by AI. By continuously monitoring and fine-tuning parameters such as temperature, pressure, and chemical flow, AI algorithms ensure that fabrication steps adhere to extremely tight tolerances, critical for micro/nano-scale features. This precision reduces variability in product characteristics and improves device performance. Efficiency gains are realized through optimized resource allocation, reduced cycle times, and predictive maintenance. AI-driven predictive maintenance, for example, decreases unscheduled downtime by anticipating equipment failures, leading to higher equipment utilization and throughput. Overall, these improvements translate into significant cost savings and a reduced environmental footprint by minimizing material and energy waste.

4.1.2. Comparative Case Studies: Traditional vs. AI-driven Approaches

Comparative case studies consistently highlight the superior performance of AI-driven approaches over traditional methods in micro/nano-fabrication. In traditional manufacturing, process control often relies on statistical process control (SPC) charts and manual adjustments, which are reactive and may not capture complex, non-linear relationships between process variables [22]. For instance, a machine vision system using blob analysis for comparative dimensional inspection significantly outperforms subjective human inspection or limited-scope go/no-go gauges, providing a single likeness score for comprehensive quality assessment.

Consider the semiconductor industry, where traditional methods struggle with electromigration (EM) and variability at advanced nodes. AI-driven approaches, incorporating advanced routing algorithms and parasitics modeling, offer solutions to achieve improved design performance under increasing metal resistance. In additive manufacturing, nozzle clogging, a common failure, can be forecasted with 97.2% accuracy by an AI model, contrasting sharply with traditional methods that detect such issues only after significant material waste has occurred [20]. Another example involves surface defect detection: multi-image control charts, incorporating multilinear principal component analysis, demonstrate superior performance in detecting various surface-related process shifts compared to traditional single-image control charts, especially when multiple shifts are considered [22]. These comparisons underscore AI's ability to provide a more comprehensive, predictive, and efficient control mechanism, leading to higher quality products and reduced environmental impact. The medical device sector also sees AI transforming quality assurance methods, offering unparalleled prospects for improved productivity, precision, and scalability over conventional approaches [6].

4.2. Challenges in AI-Driven Process Control Implementation

Despite the significant opportunities, implementing AI-driven process control in micro/nano-fabrication faces several substantial challenges. These hurdles span technical, operational, and organizational dimensions, requiring concerted effort to overcome. A primary concern revolves around data — its quality, standardization, and the complexities of integrating disparate data sources [13]. Micro/nano-fabrication facilities often operate with legacy equipment and proprietary systems, complicating unified data collection and analysis. Furthermore, the specialized nature of these processes means that data can be scarce for certain failure modes or novel materials, hindering the training of robust AI models.

Beyond data, challenges extend to the scalability of AI solutions and their industrial adoption. Transitioning from pilot projects to full-scale production requires overcoming issues related to computational infrastructure, cybersecurity, and the integration of AI with existing automation systems. The need for a skilled workforce capable of developing, deploying, and maintaining AI systems also presents an organizational challenge. Addressing these complexities is crucial for realizing the full potential of AI in sustainable micro/nano-fabrication.

4.2.1. Data Quality, Standardization, and Integration Barriers

The efficacy of AI models in process control is intrinsically linked to the quality of the data they process. In micro/nano-fabrication, data quality, standardization, and integration present significant barriers. Manufacturing environments generate vast quantities of data from diverse sources: sensors, metrology tools, inspection systems, and human input. However, this data often suffers from inconsistencies, incompleteness, noise, and lack of uniform formatting. Poor data quality directly impairs the performance of machine learning models, leading to inaccurate predictions and suboptimal control decisions.

Standardization is another critical issue. Different equipment vendors and proprietary systems produce data in varied formats, making it challenging to aggregate and integrate information across the entire fabrication line. This fragmentation impedes the creation of comprehensive datasets necessary for training advanced AI models that can optimize complex, multi-stage processes. Addressing these challenges requires robust data governance strategies, including data cleaning, transformation, and the implementation of common data models. Visual analytics techniques can support decision-making for data quality improvement, although existing studies sometimes fall short in evaluating the impact of data quality on machine learning model performance or requiring users to consider all combinations of improvement processes. Moreover, conceptualizing data quality within the context of business process management and proposing a DQ-oriented approach for process modeling can facilitate decision-making in process re-design projects [13].

4.2.2. Scalability and Industrial Adoption Issues

Scaling AI-driven process control solutions from pilot projects to full industrial adoption in micro/nano-fabrication presents considerable obstacles. One primary concern is the computational infrastructure required. Processing and

analyzing massive, real-time data streams from hundreds or thousands of sensors across a fabrication facility demands significant computing power, storage, and network bandwidth. The financial investment in such infrastructure can be substantial, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises.

Integration with existing legacy systems and operational workflows also poses a challenge. Micro/nano-fabrication plants often involve complex, tightly coupled processes that are difficult to modify without disrupting production. Seamlessly embedding AI algorithms into these established systems requires careful planning, robust interfaces, and thorough validation to ensure stability and reliability. Furthermore, the specialized nature of micro/nano-fabrication necessitates domain expertise to develop and interpret AI models, a skill set that may be scarce. Overcoming resistance to change among the workforce and establishing trust in AI-driven automation are also critical for successful industrial adoption. The issue of social impacts, particularly for additive manufacturing technologies, is still in an exploratory phase, with topics like fabrication, customization, sustainability, business models, and work emerging as relevant pointers to social impacts .

4.3. Implications for Sustainable Manufacturing Ecosystems

The widespread adoption of AI-driven process control in micro/nano-fabrication carries profound implications for sustainable manufacturing ecosystems. This technological shift extends beyond individual factories, influencing policy frameworks, regulatory landscapes, ethical considerations, and the dynamics of cross-sectoral collaboration. As AI enhances efficiency and sustainability in production, it creates a ripple effect throughout the supply chain, encouraging greater resource stewardship and circular economy principles [8][3]. For example, the European Green Deal's ambitions for a climate-neutral and circular economy underscore the necessity of innovation in sustainable practices, which AI can significantly accelerate [23].

However, the transformative nature of AI also necessitates careful consideration of its broader societal and environmental consequences. Ensuring equitable access to these technologies, addressing potential job displacement, and managing the environmental footprint of AI itself (e.g., energy consumption of data centers) become critical aspects of fostering a truly sustainable ecosystem. This requires a concerted effort from policymakers, industry leaders, researchers, and civil society to establish robust governance structures and promote responsible innovation.

4.3.1. Policy, Regulation, and Ethical Considerations

The advent of AI in micro/nano-fabrication necessitates the development of new policy, regulatory, and ethical frameworks. Policies must incentivize the adoption of AI for sustainable practices, such as through tax breaks for green manufacturing technologies or funding for research into AI-optimized eco-friendly materials. Regulations need to adapt to the speed of technological change, ensuring safety, data privacy, and accountability in AI-driven autonomous systems [6]. For instance, the medical device sector already adheres to strict regulatory frameworks, and AI integration must comply with these while enhancing quality assurance [6].

Ethical considerations are paramount. The deployment of AI in manufacturing raises questions about workforce displacement, algorithm bias, and the responsible use of AI-generated insights. Ensuring fair labor transitions, promoting transparency in AI decision-making, and establishing mechanisms for ethical oversight are essential. Furthermore, the environmental footprint of AI itself, particularly the energy consumption of large-scale data processing and model training, requires attention. Policies encouraging energy-efficient AI algorithms and infrastructure, alongside carbon offsetting initiatives, will be crucial. Initiatives like the European project PATROLS, which establishes new approach methodologies for assessing the safety of engineered nanomaterials, provide a precedent for regulatory support for sustainable innovation [23].

4.3.2. Cross-Sectoral Collaboration and Knowledge Transfer

Realizing the full potential of AI-driven sustainable micro/nano-fabrication necessitates robust cross-sectoral collaboration and efficient knowledge transfer. No single entity possesses all the expertise or resources required to address the multifaceted challenges and opportunities presented by this convergence. Collaboration between academia, industry, and government agencies is essential for accelerating research and development, validating new technologies, and establishing industry best practices. Academic institutions can contribute foundational research in AI algorithms and material science, while industry partners provide real-world data, testing environments, and commercialization pathways.

Government bodies can facilitate this collaboration through funding programs, regulatory sandboxes, and the creation of innovation hubs. Effective knowledge transfer mechanisms, such as joint research projects, industry consortia, and

educational programs, are critical for disseminating expertise and fostering a skilled workforce capable of leveraging AI for sustainable manufacturing. This collaborative ecosystem can collectively address issues like data standardization, develop common platforms for AI integration, and share lessons learned from implementation, ultimately accelerating the transition towards a more sustainable and AI-enabled micro/nano-fabrication future.

4.4. Summary of Findings

This paper has systematically examined the transformative potential of AI-driven process control in advancing sustainable micro/nano-fabrication. The analysis revealed that AI technologies, including deep learning, machine learning, and computer vision, offer unprecedented capabilities for optimizing complex manufacturing processes. These capabilities manifest in significant improvements in yield, accuracy, and efficiency by enabling real-time defect detection, predictive maintenance, and adaptive process adjustments [20]. Such enhancements directly contribute to sustainability goals by minimizing material waste, reducing energy consumption, and lowering the environmental footprint of highly resource-intensive fabrication processes [2].

The integration of AI also facilitates the adoption of sustainable manufacturing principles, such as zero-waste techniques and the use of biodegradable or low-cost alternative materials, which are crucial for developing eco-friendly devices [10][11]. However, the path to widespread AI adoption in this domain is not without challenges. Key barriers include issues related to data quality, standardization, and integration, as well as the complexities of scalability and industrial acceptance[13]. Addressing these requires strategic investments in infrastructure, robust data governance, and a skilled workforce. The socioeconomic and environmental implications, including economic feasibility, job transitions, and the energy footprint of AI itself, underscore the need for careful policy, regulation, and ethical oversight to ensure responsible technological development.

4.5. Recommendations for Future Research and Practice

Future research should prioritize the development of AI models capable of operating effectively with smaller, more specialized datasets, given the inherent data scarcity in some micro/nano-fabrication niches. This includes exploring techniques like transfer learning and few-shot learning. Further investigation into robust data integration frameworks that can harmonize disparate data sources from legacy systems is also essential for practical industrial adoption. Research efforts should also focus on creating standardized benchmarks and metrics for evaluating the sustainability impact of AI-driven processes, moving beyond simple efficiency gains to comprehensive life cycle assessments that include social indicators [3].

For practical implementation, industries should invest in training and upskilling their workforce to manage and interact with AI systems, fostering a culture of continuous learning and adaptation. Developing open-source AI tools and platforms tailored for micro/nano-fabrication could lower entry barriers for smaller enterprises. Furthermore, policymakers are encouraged to establish clear regulatory guidelines that promote ethical AI deployment, ensure data security, and incentivize sustainable manufacturing practices, fostering a conducive environment for innovation and responsible growth. Establishing cross-sectoral platforms for knowledge exchange and collaborative R&D can accelerate the transition to AI-driven sustainable fabrication.

4.6. Outlook on the Future of AI-Driven Sustainable Device Fabrication

The future of AI-driven sustainable device fabrication is poised for substantial growth and innovation. As AI technologies mature and become more accessible, their integration into micro/nano-manufacturing will deepen, leading to increasingly autonomous and self-optimizing production systems. This will enable unprecedented levels of precision, resource efficiency, and adaptability, further reducing the environmental impact of advanced device manufacturing. The convergence of AI with advanced materials science will accelerate the development and adoption of novel biodegradable and eco-friendly materials, moving closer to truly circular manufacturing models for electronics and other high-tech products [10][1].

The ongoing push towards Industry 4.0 and smart manufacturing aligns seamlessly with this trajectory, creating an ecosystem where AI acts as a central orchestrator of sustainable practices [8]. We anticipate a future where micro/nano-fabrication facilities are characterized by minimal waste, net-zero energy consumption, and closed-loop material flows, largely enabled by intelligent AI systems. This transformation extends beyond technological advancements, promising a more resilient, economically viable, and environmentally responsible manufacturing sector globally. Continued collaborative efforts across research, industry, and government will be instrumental in navigating the complexities and realizing this vision for sustainable device fabrication.

5. Conclusion

AI-driven process control is rapidly transforming micro/nano-fabrication by enabling smarter, more sustainable device manufacturing. Through data-driven automation, predictive maintenance, and real-time quality monitoring, AI helps reduce waste, energy use, and operational costs while supporting the adoption of eco-friendly materials and zero-waste practices. Yet, challenges remain around data quality, system integration, scalability, and workforce adaptation. Addressing these hurdles requires collaborative efforts across industry, academia, and policymakers, as well as investments in robust data infrastructure and ethical frameworks. As AI capabilities continue to evolve, micro/nano-fabrication is set to become more efficient, adaptable, and environmentally responsible, paving the way for a future where high-performance devices are produced with minimal environmental impact and greater economic viability.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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