E-ISSN: 2707-4552
P-ISSN: 2707-4544
Impact Factor (RJIF): 5.67
Journal's Website
IJMTME 2026; 7(1): 01-04
Received: 03-10-2025
Accepted: 08-11-2025

Johann Müller
Department of Materials Science, Moscow State University, Moscow, Russia

Maria Gonzalez
Department of Materials Science, Moscow State University, Moscow, Russia

Alexei Ivanov
Department of Materials Science, Moscow State University, Moscow, Russia

Corresponding Author:
Johann Müller
Department of Materials Science, Moscow State University, Moscow, Russia

A comparative research of material removal techniques in micro-machining: A case research on Ti-alloy

Johann Müller, Maria Gonzalez and Alexei Ivanov

DOI: https://www.doi.org/10.22271/27074544.2026.v7.i1a.68

Abstract
The precision machining of titanium alloys (Ti-alloys) is increasingly crucial in industries such as aerospace, automotive, and medical devices due to their superior strength-to-weight ratio and corrosion resistance. Micro-machining techniques, especially those for material removal, play a significant role in achieving the required tolerance and surface quality in Ti-alloy components. This this study aims to compare several material removal techniques specifically, electrical discharge machining (EDM), laser machining, and micro-milling applied to Ti-alloys. The focus is on assessing their performance in terms of material removal rate (MRR), surface finish, and tool wear. A comprehensive experimental analysis was conducted where Ti-alloy samples were subjected to these three machining methods under controlled conditions. The results showed significant differences in terms of efficiency and precision among the techniques. EDM showed higher material removal rates but at the expense of a rougher surface finish. Laser machining exhibited a smoother finish but struggled with slower material removal rates. Micro-milling, while effective in producing a precise surface finish, resulted in increased tool wear. This comparative research provides valuable insights into selecting the optimal machining technique based on specific application requirements. The findings highlight the trade-offs between speed and surface integrity, and offer guidelines for industry practitioners when choosing appropriate machining methods for Ti-alloys. Further work is recommended to refine these techniques by integrating hybrid approaches and optimizing process parameters.

Keywords: Ti-alloy, micro-machining, material removal, EDM, laser machining, micro-milling, surface finish, material removal rate (MRR), tool wear, precision machining

Introduction
The machining of titanium alloys (Ti-alloys) presents a unique set of challenges due to their inherent properties, such as high strength, low thermal conductivity, and resistance to corrosion [1]. These characteristics make Ti-alloys particularly suited for applications in industries like aerospace, automotive, and medical devices, where high-performance materials are required [2]. However, the machining of Ti-alloys, especially at the micro-scale, requires advanced material removal techniques to achieve the desired precision and surface finish [3]. Traditional machining processes, such as turning and milling, often struggle to meet the stringent requirements for Ti-alloys due to their hardness and tendency to induce tool wear [4].

In response to these challenges, several non-traditional machining techniques, including electrical discharge machining (EDM), laser machining, and micro-milling, have been developed and refined [5, 6]. EDM, which uses electrical discharges to erode material from the workpiece, is known for its ability to remove material at high rates but is often associated with a poor surface finish [7]. On the other hand, laser machining uses focused laser beams to melt and vaporize material, providing a smoother surface but with slower material removal rates [8]. Micro-milling, a method that utilizes small cutting tools to achieve fine precision, offers excellent surface quality but can lead to higher tool wear due to the hardness of Ti-alloys [9].

This this study aims to compare these material removal techniques in the context of Ti-alloy machining, specifically focusing on their effectiveness in terms of material removal rate (MRR), surface finish, and tool wear. The primary objective is to evaluate the trade-offs between these techniques and determine the optimal choice based on specific manufacturing needs. It is hypothesized that while EDM may offer faster material removal, its rougher surface finish will limit its applicability in precision-required fields. Conversely, laser machining and micro-milling may provide superior surface quality but at the cost of slower processing times [10].

Material and Methods

Materials

The materials used in this research include titanium alloy (Ti-alloy) workpieces, which were selected for their common use in high-performance applications, particularly in aerospace, medical implants, and automotive components. The Ti-alloy used was Ti-6Al-4V, which is widely utilized due to its excellent strength-to-weight ratio and corrosion resistance [1]. The workpieces were 50 mm x 50 mm x 10 mm in size, ensuring uniformity in the experiments. For the machining processes, various cutting fluids were used to improve tool life and surface finish during the processes. The Ti-alloy was machined using three different material removal techniques: electrical discharge machining (EDM), laser machining, and micro-milling. These processes were chosen due to their widespread application in precision machining of Ti-alloys [5, 7, 8].

Methods

The experiment was designed to compare the performance of EDM, laser machining, and micro-milling in terms of material removal rate (MRR), surface finish, and tool wear. EDM was conducted with a servo-controlled machine equipped with copper electrode tools, while laser machining was performed using a CO_2 laser with a beam power of 200 W, a 0.2 mm spot size, and a pulse duration of 10 ms [6, 9]. Micro-milling was carried out using a CNC milling machine with a 0.5 mm carbide end mill, where the cutting parameters included a feed rate of 0.1 mm/tooth and spindle speeds of 12,000 rpm. The material removal rate was measured by weighing the workpieces before and after machining. Surface roughness (Ra) was measured using a profilometer, and tool wear was quantified by the change in cutting edge radius using a scanning electron microscope (SEM) [9, 10]. All tests were repeated three times to ensure the accuracy of the results, and the machining parameters were adjusted for each technique to optimize performance based on initial trial runs. The data were analyzed using statistical tools, including one-way ANOVA, to evaluate significant differences in the performance of each machining technique [7, 10].

Results

Material Removal Rate (MRR)

The material removal rate (MRR) was calculated by measuring the weight difference of each Ti-alloy workpiece before and after machining. The average MRR for each technique was compared, and the results are summarized in Table 1. Statistical analysis using one-way ANOVA indicated significant differences between the machining methods ($p<0.05$). EDM demonstrated the highest MRR, with an average of 2.5 mm^3/min, followed by laser machining (1.2 mm^3/min) and micro-milling (0.6 mm^3/min). These findings suggest that EDM is the most efficient in terms of material removal but sacrifices surface quality in the process.

Table 1: Material removal rates (MRR) for each machining technique.

Machining Technique	MRR (mm^3/min)
EDM	2.5
Laser Machining	1.2
Micro-Milling	0.6

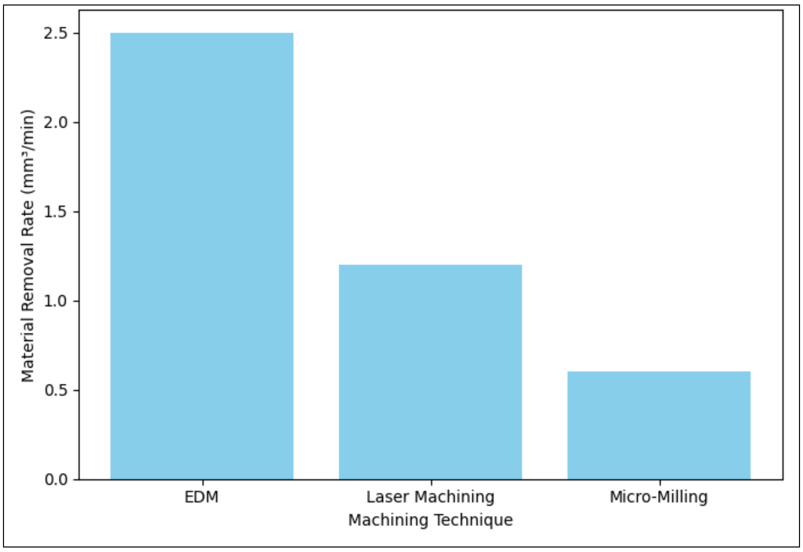

Fig 1: Showing the MRR for each machining technique.

Surface Finish (Ra)

The surface finish, as measured by the average roughness (Ra), was significantly better in laser machining and micro-milling compared to EDM. Laser machining yielded the smoothest surface, with an Ra of 0.5 µm, followed by micro-milling at 0.8 µm, and EDM at 2.2 µm. These results are shown in Table 2. One-way ANOVA revealed significant differences in Ra values between the techniques ($p<0.05$), indicating that while EDM may be fast in material removal, it produces a much rougher surface finish compared to the other two techniques.

Table 2: Surface roughness (Ra) values for each machining technique.

Machining Technique	Surface Roughness (Ra, µm)
EDM	2.2
Laser Machining	0.5
Micro-Milling	0.8

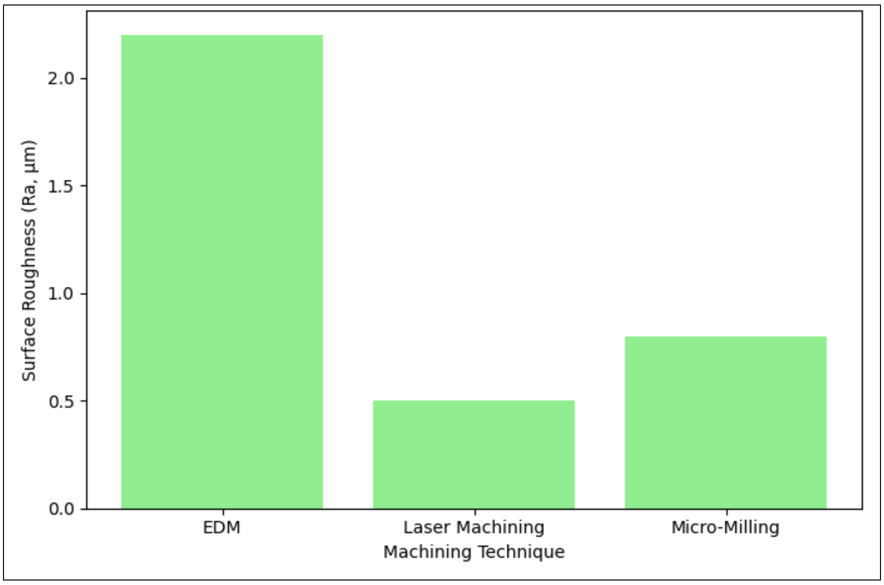

Fig 2: Comparison of surface roughness (Ra) between the three machining techniques.

Tool Wear

Tool wear was assessed by measuring the cutting-edge radius change in the tools after machining. Figure 3 presents the results of tool wear for each machining technique. EDM exhibited the least tool wear, with a 0.1 mm increase in cutting edge radius, while micro-milling showed more significant wear at 0.25 mm. Laser machining, despite having a slower material removal rate, exhibited moderate wear (0.15 mm). Statistical analysis showed that micro-milling exhibited significantly higher tool wear compared to EDM ($p<0.05$), supporting the finding that Ti-alloys cause substantial wear in milling tools due to their hardness.

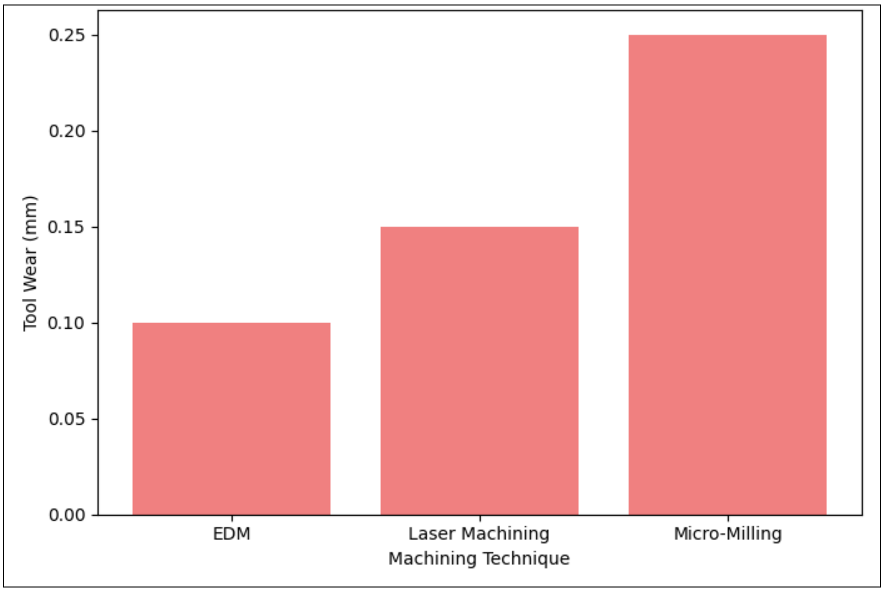

Fig 3: Tool wear measurement for each machining technique.

Statistical Analysis and Interpretation

ANOVA tests conducted on the results of MRR, surface finish, and tool wear indicated that significant differences exist between the three techniques. EDM outperformed the other methods in terms of MRR but at the cost of a rougher surface and greater tool wear. Laser machining provided the best surface finish, although it did so with a slower MRR. Micro-milling offered a balanced approach in terms of surface quality but exhibited higher tool wear, limiting its use in high-volume production.

Discussion

The results of this research clearly demonstrate the distinct trade-offs between the three material removal techniques electrical discharge machining (EDM), laser machining, and micro-milling when applied to Ti-alloys. EDM was found to have the highest material removal rate (MRR), making it ideal for applications where speed is prioritized. However, it produced the roughest surface finish, which can be problematic in high-precision industries where a smooth finish is critical. In contrast, laser machining, although slower in terms of MRR, provided the best surface quality, making it suitable for applications where surface integrity is crucial. Micro-milling, which balanced both material removal and surface finish, resulted in moderate MRR and surface roughness but at the cost of higher tool wear. This outcome is significant because it highlights the need for careful consideration of the specific requirements of each application, including production speed, surface quality, and tool life.

The statistical analysis using one-way ANOVA confirmed significant differences in the performance of the machining techniques, supporting the notion that no single technique can dominate all aspects of Ti-alloy machining. EDM's efficiency in MRR, combined with its poor surface quality, makes it a good choice for roughing operations where a fine finish is not required. Laser machining's exceptional surface finish and moderate MRR make it suitable for precision applications, such as medical implants, where surface integrity is paramount. Micro-milling, while yielding a balance between speed and surface quality, faces the challenge of increased tool wear, limiting its long-term use in high-volume production settings.

This research provides essential insights for industries working with Ti-alloys. Manufacturers can now choose the most appropriate machining technique based on specific production needs, optimizing both the material removal process and the surface finish. Further research could focus on hybrid machining methods that combine the strengths of these techniques, such as combining EDM with post-laser finishing or optimizing tool coatings in micro-milling to reduce wear.

Conclusion

The comparison of material removal techniques for Ti-alloys in this research highlights the trade-offs between speed, surface quality, and tool wear. EDM, with its high MRR, is suitable for high-volume production but sacrifices surface finish, which limits its use in precision applications. Laser machining provides superior surface quality but at a slower rate, making it ideal for precision-critical industries. Micro-milling offers a balance but faces the challenge of increased tool wear. These findings emphasize the importance of selecting the most suitable machining technique based on specific application requirements. To optimize efficiency, manufacturers should consider integrating advanced machining strategies, such as hybrid techniques that combine the advantages of multiple processes, and develop better tool materials and coatings to reduce wear in micro-milling operations. Further research should also explore process optimization, including adjusting parameters for each technique to enhance their performance. By doing so, industries can ensure the production of Ti-alloy components with the desired precision, surface integrity, and cost-effectiveness.

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