

# Globalisation: the lifecycle of a flip-flop

An explanation of how globalisation affects the world, through the lens of the world systems theory\*

\*with the help of some flip-flops

## Introduction

In Knowles 2014, 'Flip-flop: A Journey Through Globalisation's Backroads' we learn the impact that global trade has on the environment, migration, and economic development and the inequalities that are created. To understand such occurrences, Wallerstein's 'World-Systems Theory' can be adopted. This theory explains global development through the use of core and periphery nations and the interdependencies of each.

## Environmental

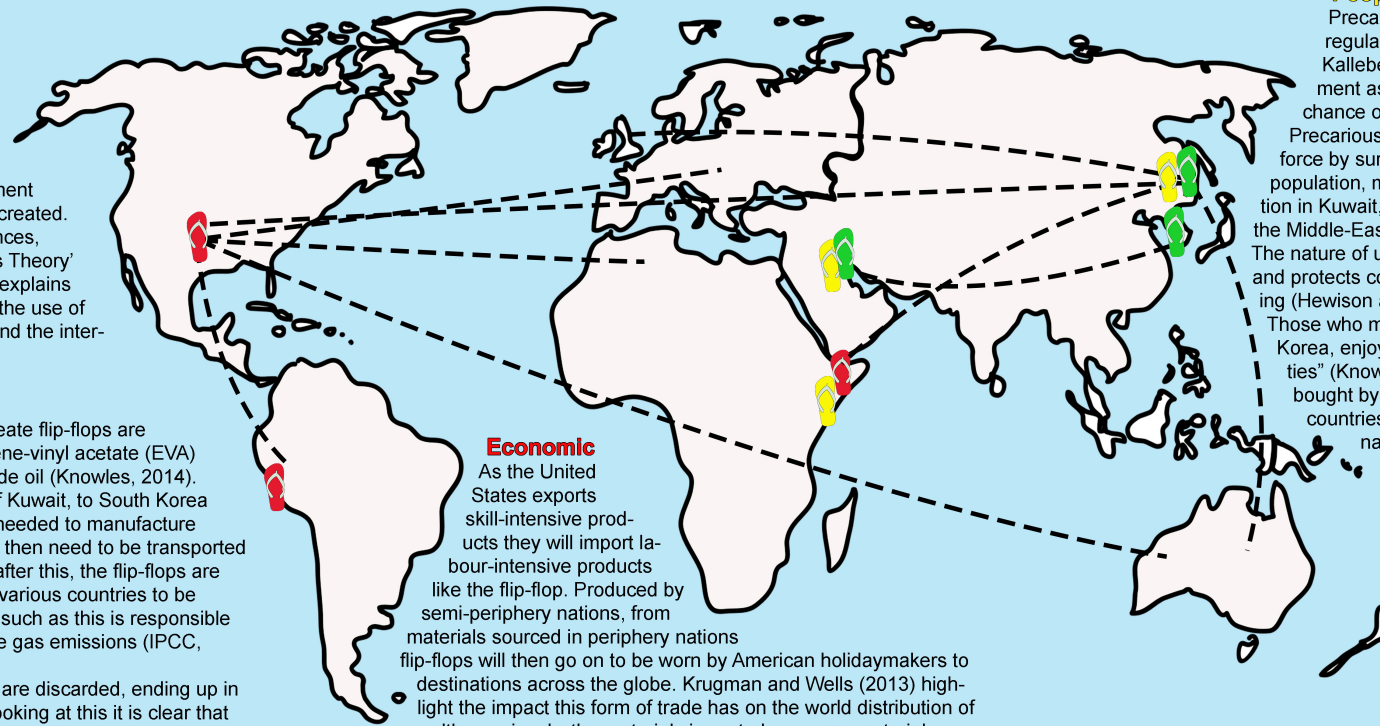
The main two oils used to create flip-flops are polyethylene (PE) and ethylene-vinyl acetate (EVA) both of which come from crude oil (Knowles, 2014). Oil needs to be moved out of Kuwait, to South Korea to produce the PE granules needed to manufacture flip-flops, the petrochemicals then need to be transported to China from South Korea, after this, the flip-flops are shipped around the world to various countries to be bought. Worldwide transport such as this is responsible for 14% of global greenhouse gas emissions (IPCC, 2014).

Often, after use the flip flops are discarded, ending up in landfills all over the world. Looking at this it is clear that while flip flops may not be in and of themselves a big part of climate change, but the way they are produced represents an unsustainable global market that creates many disposable plastic products every year. In order to ensure a reduction in CO2 created by the use of petrochemicals, Ren et al (2009) suggests the introduction of alternatives such as biomass. Philipsborn et al (2018) argue that unless climate action is taken now, climate change may have negative effects on global child health, from decreasing mortality rates to an increase in the rate of natural disasters. Climate change not only has massive direct consequences for humans but will likely also destroy biodiversity in plants and other animals (Warren et al, 2018). Such transport from periphery to semi-periphery nation-states is essential to continue the interdependence of nations (Cohen and Kennedy, 2013) and economic development is prioritised over environmental impact.

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## Economic

As the United States exports skill-intensive products they will import labour-intensive products like the flip-flop. Produced by semi-periphery nations, from materials sourced in periphery nations flip-flops will then go on to be worn by American holidaymakers to destinations across the globe. Krugman and Wells (2013) highlight the impact this form of trade has on the world distribution of wealth, previously, the materials imported were raw materials

such as rubber from South American countries, which were used to create the sole of the flip-flop. Now as King (2012) highlights, the globalisation of markets means products no longer come as a 'whole', creating core and semi-periphery economies like the United States and China to become far more dependant on one another. The largest volume of flip-flops travel through Singapore and then to the port of Djibouti, via shipping containers, where they are distributed across the African continent to be sold to consumers looking for cheap products. (Knowles, 2018). Increasingly, the shoes are transported to Ethiopia, a country with low GDP, and a rapidly increasing demand for a cheap alternative to bare feet. Knowles (2018), found that in order to avoid paying customs duties, many flip-flops are smuggled across the Djibouti/Ethiopia border, arriving at the Addis Ababa's central market illegally, to be sold to poorer customers attracted by their low price. Krugman and Wells (2013) explore the effect global trade has had on global wage inequalities of workers. Comparing Chinese manufacturing wages which are just 4% of that of the United States, shows that despite mass growth in China's economy, workers employed in the manufacturing of labour intensive products such as the flip-flop are, on a global scale, not being paid a fair wage compared to those in core, consumer nations. This is consistent with Neo-Marxist and Wallerstein's arguments that such globalization is performed to the detriment of non-core economies (Heywood, 2014).

## People

Precarious work is described as such due to the unregulated and temporary nature of it (Hewison and Kalleberg, 2012), workers are in an unstable environment as their wages are low, there is little to no chance of representation and low job security. Precarious work creates economic migration of the workforce by survival necessity, this is evident in the Kuwaiti population, migrant workers make up 69.5% of the population in Kuwait, many of them oil workers from other parts of the Middle-East and Southern India (United Nations, 2017). The nature of unregulated work puts the brunt on the worker and protects companies from facing financial difficulty according (Hewison and Kalleberg, 2012). Those who make up the teams producing polymers in South Korea, enjoy "high pay, transport, housing and leisure facilities" (Knowles, 2015). The plastic pellets produced are bought by small and medium-sized flip-flop factories, in countries where labour is cheap – notably China, Vietnam, and Sub-Saharan African nations. Many workers in Eastern Chinese factories were once farmers living in rural villages in the West, however, since the late 1980s, 100 million rural migrants have moved away from agricultural lifestyles to work in industry – the biggest movement of people during peacetime in history (Murphy, 2002). As working conditions and wages in China improve, flip-flop production begins to move to countries like Vietnam, Sudan, Egypt, Ethiopia and other parts of the African

continent, where labour is still cheap. Female education in Kuwait has been increasing as a result of sudden oil wealth in the country, between 1965 and 1985 the percentage of literate females over the age of 10 rose from 28 to 63 among Kuwaiti nationals (Al-Qudsi and Shah, 1990). The increase for non-Kuwaiti females was just 23 percent. Similarly, the average age women were married, also increased by 3.5 years. These increases changed women's economic roles within the country. The labour force involvement of Kuwaiti women increased, from 2 percent in 1965, almost reaching 14 percent by 1985. There was a bigger increase experienced by non-Kuwaiti women, rising from 19 percent in 1965, and more than doubling to 43 percent by 1985 (Al-Qudsi and Shah, 1990).

## Conclusion

Using Immanuel Wallerstein's 'World-Systems Theory' to analyse the global impact of the production of flip-flops allows a consistent overview of the exploitation of periphery nations to the benefit of core nations. Economic disparity and instability are caused by the use of cheap raw materials from nations such as Sub-Saharan Africa. This continues with the use of cheap labour in Semi-Periphery nations such as South Korea and China for the assembling of the product before being sold onto to Core nations for use. This study has highlighted the damaging environmental impact of this capitalist global trade model and has highlighted some of the migration issues that has also been caused.

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