

The Guardian



The slipper surge: 'They're very important in terms of helping us cope emotionally'

Australia is experiencing an unprecedented demand for slippers - but what's good for the soul is not always good for the sole

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When the first tendrils of autumn crept their way into our poorly insulated homes, the messages started. Friends and coworkers started asking me something I'd never been asked before: "What slippers should I buy?" It was something I'd been wondering too, researching the perfect pair on consumer review websites.

I settled on Glerups - boiled wool slippers, made in Denmark from New Zealand merino - lavishly praised by The Wirecutter, The Strategist and Afar. I had my credit card cancelled twice while attempting to procure them. A month after my third - successful - try at a purchase, they finally arrived. They're as cushiony, hygge and breathable as promised - though they make me look more like an elf on a shelf than a chic Scandi minimalist. Meanwhile, the requests for slipper suggestions kept coming.

This anecdote is backed by data - Australia is in the midst of a "slipper surge", as a representative of online shop The Iconic put it. They have sold three times as many pairs as they did this time last year. Google search trends reveal a similar pattern - more Australians are looking for slippers than ever before.



Glerups boiled wool slippers. Photograph: Glerups

In early winter, there were reports of slipper-related injuries, nicknamed “Ugg boot foot” – though Australian Podiatry Association president Katrina Richards says that the biggest problems she’s seen have been caused by the transition from house shoes to hard training, rather than slippers alone. “People just go too hard, too soon and you end up getting a lot of overuse injuries,” she says.

Richards was not impressed by my Glerup slip-ons, since their lack of a heel counter to hold my foot in is likely to lead to “clawing”, as my toes attempt to grip for purchase. “Your foot shouldn’t have to do anything to try and keep in a shoe,” she explains. Slides cause similar issues, even Birkenstocks, if they don’t have a back strap. Grip socks also won’t cut it – “there’s not a lot of evidence to support

their use”.

Richards says Uggs aren’t a great pick either, since – especially with older pairs – your foot tends to “flop around”. “I give everyone the challenge of actually looking at themselves walking in the Ugg boots,” she suggests, to see if your foot is properly held in and you’re “walking perfectly straight on the sole of the shoe”. In most instances, she suspects, the Ugg will buckle, causing you to tread on the upper.

Regardless of their limited orthotic support, Uggs still retain an emotional appeal. Alexandra Sherlock, a lecturer in fashion design at RMIT, who wrote her PhD on footwear and social belonging, suggests, “it’s interesting with Uggs, because they’re an iconic Australian shoe”. She wonders if, in a time of crisis and uncertainty, that connection to national identity might be an important driver for people.



Model Carolyn Murphy wearing Ugg Australia boots on the street - wearing Uggs in public is taboo in Australia, note both stylist Sarah Starkey and sociologist Alexandra Sherlock, but common in North America and Europe. Photograph: Ugg boots pr dept

Her research has found that, when it comes to our choice in footwear, “it’s got a lot to do with who those shoes are associated with. We employ them in terms of thinking about our identity”. With Uggs, she cautions, “Ugg Australia’s actually an American brand ... and there have been battles over the years about whether it’s possible to trademark a type of shoe. So if [an Australian product] is important, that’s a consideration.”

When it comes to slippers, what’s bad for the sole might be good for the soul. Richards cautions against wearing “shoes that have been worn to death”; but Sherlock says, “what’s interesting is what happens between a wearer and a shoe after we buy them”. Slippers, “because they’re worn in such an intimate environment ... become really evocative.” Ultimately, “the more we wear them, the more we become inseparable, they become us and we almost become them”.

Lately, fashion stylist Sarah Starkey has found herself coming back to one pair of slippers over and over, a candy pink pair of shearling slides by beachwear label Double Rainbouu, that she used in their fashion week show in 2017.

The shoes, bear a striking resemblance to The Iconic’s best selling pair of the season - equally fluffy, equally candy-coloured slides from Los Angeles brand Roam. “You’re going to be staring at them a long time if you’re sitting on the sofa,” she says. “So it might as well be something that’s uplifting.”



'Cloud' slippers from Roam, currently the best selling style on The Iconic. Photograph: The Iconic

Starkey also dismisses the old-fashioned idea that one shouldn't wear slides with socks. In her work for brands, and fashion magazines, "it's a common thread that I use socks with slides". As well as being "someone who doesn't really like looking at toes," she notes, "it's more comfortable as well. If I'm in the house I'll always wear socks and slippers".



Slippers and socks on the runway, styled by Sarah Starkey, at the Double Rainbouu show in 2017. Photograph: Stefan Gosatti/Getty Images

Starkey is hopeful this newfound fondness for house shoes, and a little germophobia, will lead Australians to adopt the Asian practice of never wearing outdoor shoes indoors, and vice versa. "It should just be a thing everywhere," she says.

Sherlock isn't surprised we're more drawn to slippers now. "I think because we have such significant associations between our slippers and that feeling of relaxation we get at the end of the day ... they can become quite evocative in their power to help us feel that way, when we need to."

"People crave that tactility and comfort, in times of crisis. There's something very reassuring about it. I think they're very important in terms of helping us cope emotionally."

As for whether our need to feel relaxed should outweigh our need to look after our feet, Richards has some simple words of wisdom: "If your feet hurt in the shoes you're wearing, stop wearing those shoes."

The sociologist's slipper of choice

The ones you already own

"Because they become so symbolic and so powerful in terms of their associations with relaxation and comfort, we employ them when we need to feel that way."

The podiatrist's slipper of choice

A sturdy, supportive pair of sneakers

"You underestimate how much incidental exercise you do when you're working from home, even just walking from your desk to the kitchen. The main thing with slippers is there's not a lot of support around the heel counter, and that holds your foot into the shoe. Your foot doesn't get a lot of support, it's just flopping around. A good shoe will have it so your foot is held in nicely."

The stylist's slipper of choice



Silver Balenciaga slides. Photograph: Balenciaga

Daiso for affordable house shoes, Balenciaga for something expensive

On Daiso: "They have such a huge variety, and they're very cheap." On designer slides: "It's definitely a trend to wear the closed-toed Birkenstocks with a ribbed, earthy coloured sock ... but I looked at the prices of Birkenstocks, and I just think, if they're \$200, for an extra few hundred you could just get Balenciaga slides."

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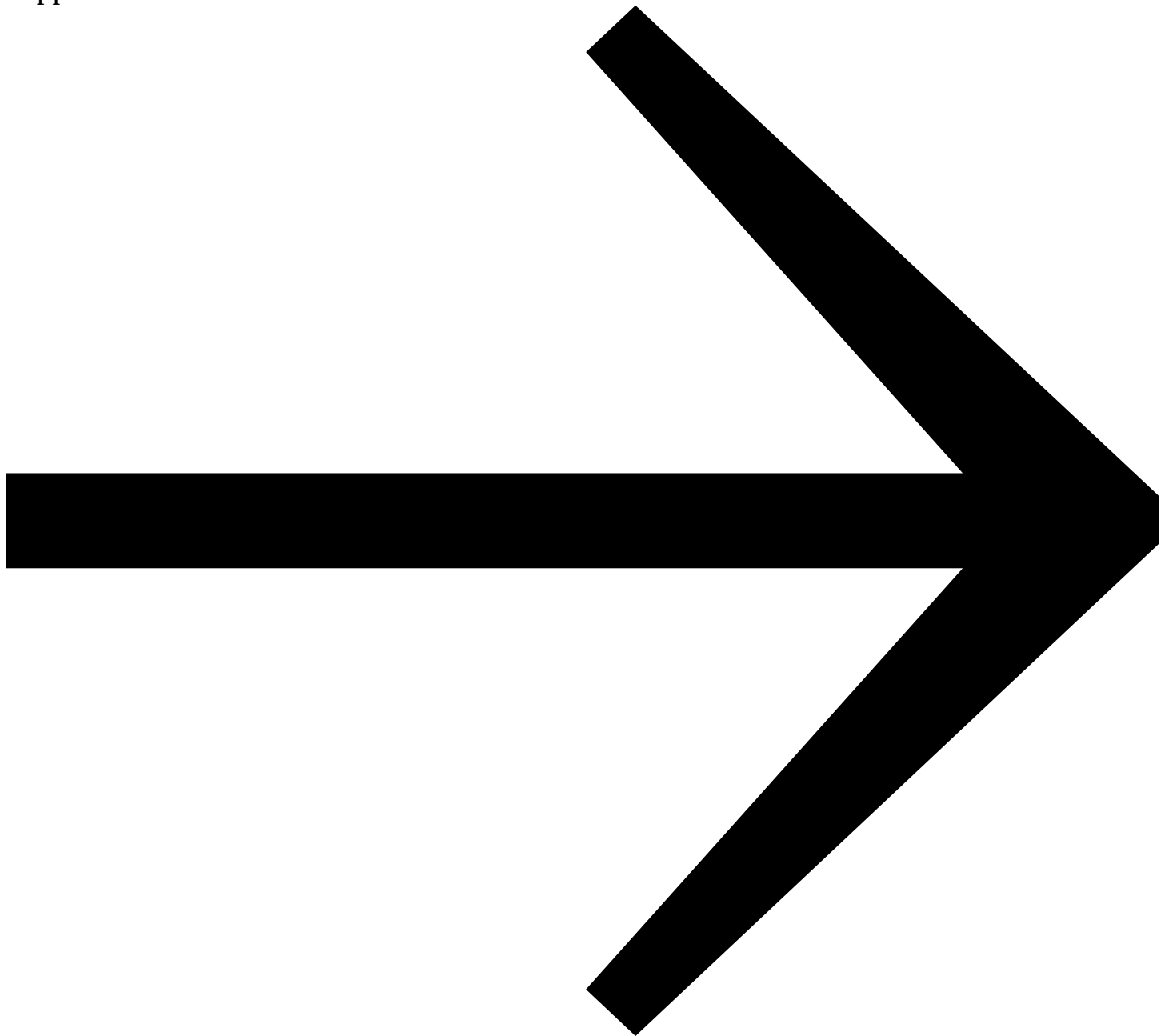
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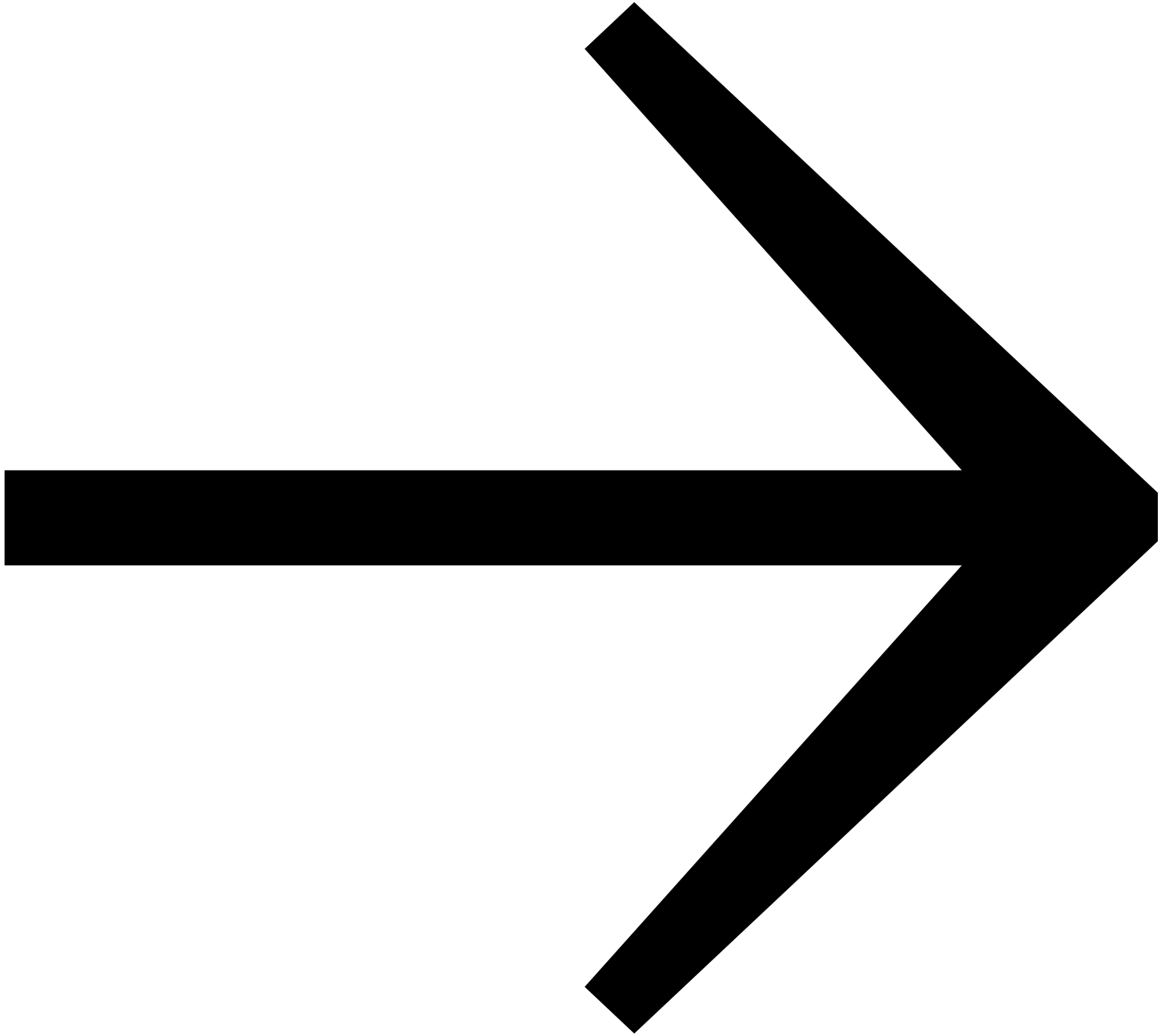
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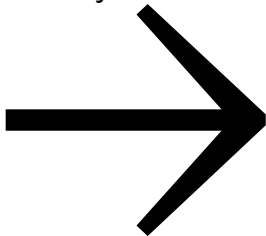


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