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Who in Their Right Mind Would Pay for a Nap?

By [Theresa Fisher](#) • February 8, 2017 at 1:10pm

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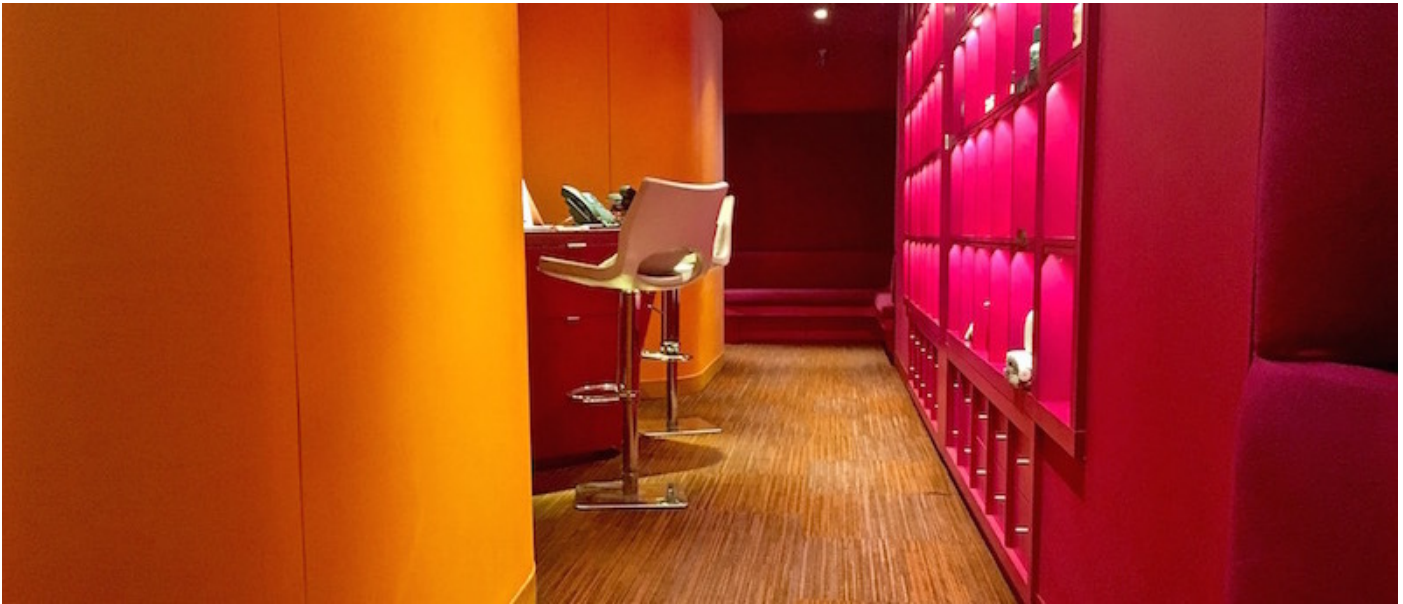


I didn't know how naked I was supposed to get for a nap. Winston Churchill said he always "took *[sic]* off his clothes and got into bed, sometime between dinner and lunch." But *my* bed was a 45-minute subway ride away.

It was almost noon on a Wednesday in August, and I was standing in a nap "cabin" inside Yelo Spa (pronounced "Yellow"), a nap-and-reflexology spa in midtown Manhattan that sells sleep for \$1-per-minute. I'd gotten my first glimpse of Yelo about a half-hour earlier, when I'd arrived for my appointment, sweaty and wired.

Upon showing up, I'd been greeted warmly by two "hosts," one of whom lead me to a plush bench in the back of Yelo's waiting area, a futuristic space outlined in pink and orange walls. She'd then brought me a pre-nap snack (dainty balls of something that tasted gluten-free) and handed me a form so I could choose the scent and sounds I'd like during my nap.

With my napping preferences set, I'd proceeded into my cabin, a rectangular room that contained little more than a cluster of lights on the ceiling, some built-in shelving and a special "zero gravity bed." The host had excused herself from the room so I could take off some amount of clothing and get underneath the cashmere blanket folded on the special bed, which at this point looked decidedly un-special.



Left to disrobe, I unbuttoned my shirt and tried to envision how I'd be dressed if I were at home and for some reason had fallen asleep before lunch. I didn't want to be the weirdo who watches TV in their winter coat or holds their purse on their lap when they're sitting at their desk — except that's exactly the weirdo I am. Nonetheless, I channeled Churchill (a little) and took off my shirt, but left on my jean shorts, and lied down.

After I feebly gave her the OK, the host re-entered the room, turned on soft muzak and diffused a sleep-blend aromatherapy spray. Then, she pressed a button on the side of the bed, triggering its transformation from a flat table into a U-shaped structure, so that my legs were positioned above my head. (OK, fine, it was special.) Finally, she turned off the lights and left. I'd been officially *put down* for my nap, to use Yelo's lingo.

In the dark, in defiance of gravity, in cashmere and denim, my internal monologue faded to black and I conked out. No, just kidding. I reclined in the special bed, wide awake, and let my thoughts veer into self-indulgent territory: *This — me, right now — could be a TV episode, or at least a sub-plot. But which show would really nail why this is funny?*

My nap-spa experience probably won't make it to Netflix, because it doesn't say much about life in 2016, or about napping. That's not to say napping can't be the stuff of great comedy. In the 1997 Seinfeld episode "The Nap," George Costanza built a napping nook into his desk to sleep on the job. The joke rang true because George fit the stereotype of a napper to a whiny, lazy tee. Nineteen years ago, long before Elaine could have been a jerk on Tinder, or Kramer could have landed on Uber's payroll, life was less optimized. Napping wasn't a productivity hack. It was a slacker's game. Sure, the "power nap" was a 20-year-old concept, but naps didn't belong to the power elite. They belonged to the Costanzas, the undermotivated schlubs who put more effort into their comfort than their careers.

Then, the stereotype started to change. The year after Seinfeld aired "The Nap," [James Maas](#), the psychologist who'd coined the term "power nap," published his first best-selling book on daytime rest, "Power Sleep." Gradually, the collective "we" saw napping as a way to boost efficiency and immunity, sharpen memory and eliminate all human frailties. As the new millennium marched on, a growing pool of very un-Costanza-like people adopted the Costanza method, napping between spreadsheets to stay fresh. By the later '00s, the same old, overlooked statistics — most people nap, at least once a month, and *some* geniuses do it more often! — were a staple of [life-hacking charticles](#). Now, in 2016, we've largely shed our cultural napping shame, but every movement has a limit. And for the otherwise boundless napping craze, that limit might be traveling and paying for a nap.

How to Sell a Nap

Riding the coattails of napping itself, pay-to-nap services have been positioned as a trend for almost a decade. In 2007, The *New York Times* called [sleep](#) "the new bottled water," reasoning that "although it can be had free, it is increasingly being marketed as an upscale amenity." The story, which focused on buying naps as a blossoming novelty, mentioned the founder and owner of Yelo Spa, Nicolas Ronco, who'd opened shop earlier that year, inspired by Japan's corporate napping culture. "I see 25 Yelo centers in New York," said Ronco, predicting a nap-spa explosion, "and then in every crazy low-quality-of-life city where people lack space."

Ronco's predictions didn't quite bear out. This year, according to Ronco, a *second* Manhattan Yelo center is set to open, facing little competition in New York. Yelo surely hasn't failed, but pay-to-nap facilities haven't taken off the way napping has. Nap spas still aren't a thing, perhaps due partly to the fact that women don't buy a lot of naps.

"We have some people who feel like it's their apartment almost, and they'll set it up however they want."

Yelo is New York's premier nap spa, but it wasn't the original proprietor of daytime sleep. Back in 1995, the spa Canyon Ranch added a sleep program to its menu. And sleep services showed up at spas and wellness retreats scattered around the country. In 2004, a "sleep salon" called MetroNaps put a fleet of hooded-sleep chairs [in the Empire State Building](#). After opening a second location in downtown Manhattan, MetroNaps overhauled its business model. Rather than sell sleep to tired passersby, Metronaps started selling its customized nap pods to companies interested in providing employees with on-site resting facilities. The decision was probably a smart one, as Metronaps' sleek "EnergyPod" found its way to Google and NASA, among dozens of other companies, health centers, hospitals and colleges. Without Metronaps selling sleep, Yelo lost its main New York rival, and never gained a new one.

Ronco doesn't see Yelo naps as a luxury service. "Starting at \$20, which is the price of a NY sandwich or cab ride, I don't consider it to be a luxury service," he said. "A 20-min nap is a great transition to the real world."

Unlike napping, however, food and transportation aren't otherwise free.

Who Shells Out for Shuteye?

I let my mind wander for about 10 minutes, and then I committed to the task at hand: napping, or trying to. It seemed like a long shot. The quiet, temperate nap cabin was by all means pleasant. And I liked that the zero gravity bed forced me into a loosely tucked position, but my mind and my body weren't synced up. Physiologically speaking, Yelo may have created the closest thing to an ideal sleep environment in New York City, but everything about the situation begged for a vigilant mind: It was lunchtime. I was working, technically. My office has nap pods, which hardly get used. Plus, I rarely nap. When I do nap, it's because I need to — right then, right there. I'm [what some sleep researchers](#) would describe as an (extreme) "restorative napper," meaning I nap when I'm ready to drop.



Admittedly, I'd been skeptical of the nap-spa concept from the get-go. I would never schedule a nap ahead of time and I didn't see the appeal of schlepping 30 blocks to shell out money for one, but I wondered who would.

One part of the clientele made sense to me: tired travelers who can't check into their hotels. But out-of-towners, Ronco and O'Shea said, don't keep Yelo afloat.

I could also think of hypothetical situations where someone might seek out Yelo — maybe if a *Big Law* associate who commutes in from Connecticut knew they had a week of 15-hour days ahead of them. But specific cases of Yelo being the most convenient place to nap for drained, well-off people couldn't be the basis for a booming business. And it isn't, according to Ronco and O'Shea, who offered similar descriptions of the regular customers who fill Yelo's appointment books on the weekdays, typically between noon and 4 p.m.

"We have a lot of people who are in super-stressful, highly active jobs who are basically up at 6 am, but might be out until 2 or 3 in the morning for work, and have to get up the next day and do it all over again," said O'Shea. "They physically can't keep that lifestyle up without having to recharge during the day, so this is their time out. Instead of having to depend on cups of coffee or something to get you through the afternoon, they actually come and sleep."

The customers they described didn't register as real people, or even exaggerated versions of real people.

Plenty of customers, Ronco said, go out of their way to nap at Yelo, despite having convenient (and free) alternatives. "The nap pods offered at companies such as Google do not offer privacy nor a real space that is conducive to napping," said Ronco via email. "We even have clients that live close by and still come take naps at Yelo."

The customers they described didn't register in my mind as real people, or even exaggerated versions of real people. But, I was trying to understand how someone like *me* might become a Yelo devotee. And Yelo's regulars are unlike me in at least one relevant way: They're men, most likely. While women fuel the beauty and wellness industries overall, they're not buying naps. Men make up at least 60 percent of Yelo's clientele across the board, by Ronco and O'Shea's estimates, and even more of it

Where the Men At

Yelo's male-heavy clientele may be the norm in the niche pay-to-sleep industry. Consider the largest city in Brazil, Sao Paulo, where power-napping centers have recently gained popularity. A [study](#) published earlier this year analyzed a year of business at Cochilo (Portuguese for “nap”), a power-nap center where 30 to 60 minutes in a soundproof cabin costs between \$5 and \$20. In 2014, Cochilo sold a total of 4,625 naps, 73 percent of which were taken by men.



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“I think this goes back to who holds certain corporate positions,” said O’Shea of the gender break-down. “They’re at hedge funds or law firms, or whatever, and they’re *go, go, go* all the time, and I don’t think that they take that me-time out for themselves. So in the middle of the day, they’re like ‘well what do I do? I have to keep going, to keep face.’”

I reached out to sleep experts and sociologists to make sense of the trend. Only a few researchers had even heard of nap spas like Yelo and no one was willing to say with certainty why men buy naps and women don’t. But they floated a few explanations that jibe with what studies show about the interplay between gender and sleep. For one thing, men still make more money than women. So, perhaps Yelo’s trail of males simply reflects their disproportionate economic sway.

But, researchers weren’t persuaded by the idea that men buy naps because they need them more than women do. Women don’t need jobs with fancy titles to be overworked and underslept. Women are more likely than men to balance careers with primary childcare duties.

“I don’t have any data directly on this, but I would suggest that women need naps just as much as men do, but simply can’t spare that time, because an [extra] 45 minutes would be cannibalized for any these many other unpaid, unending responsibilities,” suggested Sarah Burgard, a sociologist who researches population studies at the University of Michigan.

My stomach was growling. Noon is lunchtime, not bedtime.

New York City is also home to plenty of *go, go, go* women who indulge in me-time. Why does a nap spa attract boss-men over boss-women? Maybe because women have been socially conditioned against seeking out vulnerable situations like falling asleep in strange places. From a young age, women learn that they pay the price for “reckless behavior”: walking home on unknown streets, jogging at night, showing skin. But it’s all conjecture, really. Despite seeing why men might be more likely than women to visit a nap spa, I still didn’t see why most would.

I spent about 10 minutes battling my brain to fall asleep, but trying to relax isn’t relaxing. And simply being at Yelo constituted a work assignment, so I let myself ride out the nap in a conscious state. I was able to tune out to the point where I stopped taking note of what I was thinking about. But as soon as the room started to brighten — a graduated lighting scheme is meant to simulate a sunrise and wake you up slowly, as though you’re sleeping in a forest — I snapped back into vigilance. I hadn’t overcome wakefulness, for all the reasons I’ve detailed. Plus, my stomach was growling. Noon is lunchtime, not bedtime.

But, as I gathered my stuff and prepared to ask O’Shea endless questions about the business of hawking rest, I felt good about the amount of clothing I’d removed for my nap.

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You're sleeping through the good stuff

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