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Research Article

Reworking Respectability: Soft Life, Sexuality, and Class Aspiration Among University Women in Ghana

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Abstract

This article examines soft life among university women in Ghana as a vocabulary of aspiration through which young women negotiate sexuality, class desire, respectability, and economic uncertainty. It argues that soft life should not be dismissed as luxury-seeking, moral decline, or superficial consumerism. Rather, it is a contemporary reworking of respectable femininity: a way of claiming comfort, beauty, emotional ease, romantic care, and social value while remaining subject to gendered surveillance. Methodologically, the article is a conceptual and interpretive study. It synthesises interdisciplinary scholarship with an analysis of publicly circulating Ghanaian discourse on soft life, slay-queen anxieties, beauty, dating, sponsorship, and class performance. By clarifying this evidentiary basis, the article avoids presenting illustrative social examples as interview data while still treating everyday language and public discourse as meaningful social evidence. The argument foregrounds internal differences among university women, particularly class background, religion, region, institutional context, and urban location. It shows that soft life neither replaces respectability nor liberates women from it. Instead, it reorganises respectability around social media visibility, precarious mobility, romantic provision, beauty labour, and the desire to be seen as valued. The article concludes that soft life is best understood as a gendered politics of aspiration, revealing how young women imagine the good life in a context where education promises mobility but does not guarantee security.

Keywords

Soft Life, Respectability, Ghana, University Women, Sexuality, Intimate Economies, Digital Femininity, Class Aspiration

1. Introduction: Soft Life Is Not the End of Respectability

In contemporary Ghanaian youth culture, soft life has become a striking vocabulary of aspiration. It evokes comfort, leisure, beauty, emotional ease, financial support, stylish consumption, and freedom from unnecessary suffering. Among university women, the phrase circulates through jokes, captions, beauty aesthetics, dating expectations, peer conversations, social media performances, and claims about self-worth. It may refer to being taken care of, avoiding hardship, enjoying good food, dressing well, receiving gifts, travelling, maintaining beauty, or refusing relationships that offer neither emotional nor material care. Yet soft life is not simply a lifestyle slogan. It is a social language through which young women negotiate education, sexuality, class aspiration, and moral reputation. [1, 2].

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This article argues that soft life among university women in Ghana is best understood as a reworking of respectability. Older models of respectable femininity attached value to education, modesty, sexual restraint, Christian and familial morality, disciplined conduct, and future marriageability. The respectable university woman was expected to be educated but not sexually reckless, ambitious but not arrogant, modern but not morally loose, socially visible but not scandalous. Contemporary soft-life femininity does not entirely reject these expectations. It rearranges them. It attaches feminine value not only to restraint and discipline, but also to comfort, beauty, consumption, romantic standards, emotional care, and visible upward mobility.

The central argument, therefore, is that soft life is not the abandonment of respectability. It is a new grammar of respectable aspiration. It allows university women to claim dignity and value in a context where education no longer guarantees stable class mobility, where digital culture intensifies comparison, and where intimate relationships often carry both emotional and material expectations. The article does not treat young women's pursuit of soft life as a moral failure. Nor does it reduce soft life to transactional sex. Instead, it analyses soft life as an intimate economy: a field where money, love, gifts, beauty, sex, status, religious morality, and class desire intersect. [3, 4].

This framing matters because public discussions of young women, sexuality, and material aspiration in Ghana often fall into moral panic. Women who seek comfort, stylish consumption, or financially supportive relationships may be dismissed as lazy, materialistic, spoiled, slay queens, or sexually irresponsible. Such labels obscure the structural pressures under which many young women pursue education, respect, romance, and social mobility. Ghanaian university women live within overlapping expectations: they must succeed academically, remain morally respectable, look attractive, manage social media visibility, prepare for employment, avoid sexual scandal, and demonstrate upward mobility. Soft life emerges precisely within this tension.

The analysis proceeds through the study's conceptual methodology, the historical grammar of educated femininity, contemporary aspirations for comfort, intimate economies, social media performances, and variation across social and institutional settings. It then examines the moral double bind before showing how older codes of respectability are renegotiated rather than displaced.

2. Methodology, Scope, and Evidentiary Basis

This is a conceptual and interpretive analysis grounded in published scholarship on Ghanaian gender relations, students, youth transitions, romantic exchange, and media cultures, supplemented by identifiable examples of public commentary. It does not present original interviews, focus groups, campus observations, or a sampled corpus of social media posts. References to gifts, clothing, captions, or restaurant photographs are illustrative possibilities, not findings from a new empirical study. The distinction matters: the article develops an interpretation for future testing rather than estimating how frequently Ghanaian students embrace soft-life practices.

This clarification is necessary because soft life is both an emic expression and an analytical category. As an emic expression, it appears in everyday language, captions, jokes, dating discourse, and youth conversation. As an analytical category, it helps name a wider social formation: the pursuit of comfort, care, beauty, class mobility, and emotional ease under conditions of insecurity. The article treats soft life neither as a fixed identity nor as a statistical population category. It is a mobile vocabulary through which young women negotiate femininity, class aspiration, and moral judgment. [2, 5].

The geographical focus is Ghana, but the argument does not assume that all university women experience soft life in the same way. Class background, religious affiliation, region, institutional type, family resources, and urban location shape what soft life means and how it can be performed. A woman in a private university in Accra may encounter different forms of consumption, mobility, and digital display from a woman in a public university in Cape Coast, Kumasi, Tamale, Winneba, Ho, or Sunyani. Christian, Muslim, and other moral worlds may also produce different vocabularies of sexual restraint and feminine respectability. The phrase university women in Ghana is therefore used as an analytical field, not as a claim of uniform experience.

The analysis distinguishes what cited studies document from what this article proposes as a possible interpretation. Evidence from University of Cape Coast studies concerns participants in those studies, not all women enrolled at Ghanaian universities. Similarly, research on corporate women's media use or adolescents' social-media practices offers comparative context, not direct evidence about the experiences of present-day university women. Examples of public moral labels are treated as discourse rather than measured student attitudes.

The study's principal limitation is its lack of original campus-level evidence. Its purpose is to formulate a testable argument about the relationship between respectability and aspirational comfort, while avoiding claims that a single lifestyle or sexual economy characterises all Ghanaian students. Interviews and systematically sampled posts would be required to examine prevalence, variation, and lived interpretations.

3. The Older Grammar of Respectable Femininity

To understand soft life, it is necessary first to reconstruct the older moral and social grammar against which it is being reworked. Respectability in Ghanaian gender history has

never been simply a matter of personal morality. It has operated as a social code through which femininity, class mobility, sexuality, religious discipline, education, family honour, and future marriageability were brought together. A woman's respectability was judged not only by what she did, but also by how she appeared, moved in public, spoke, dressed, related to men, managed sexuality, and reflected upon her family.

Respectable femininity functioned as a form of social regulation. It offered women a route to recognition, dignity, and social mobility, but it also disciplined them. It gave value to the educated woman, but only when education was attached to modesty, moral restraint, domestic responsibility, and controlled sexuality. The respectable woman was expected to be modern but not morally excessive, educated but not rebellious, visible but not sexually exposed, ambitious but not threatening, desirable but not publicly available. Respectability was therefore both a resource and a constraint.

One historical source of this grammar was Christian mission education. In the Gold Coast and later Ghana, mission schools shaped ideals of educated womanhood. Girls' education was often justified not only in terms of intellectual development, but also through domestic refinement, Christian morality, cleanliness, motherhood, and marriage. Even when girls' education opened new spaces for mobility and public participation, it did so through a moral framework that tied female advancement to discipline and respectability. [6, 7].

This produced a paradox. Education expanded women's possibilities, but it also made their conduct more visible and more heavily judged. A schoolgirl or university woman was not simply an individual student. She became a representative of family investment, religious training, institutional prestige, and national progress. Her sexuality, dress, speech, and friendships could therefore become matters of public concern. The educated woman had to perform modernity carefully.

Respectable femininity was also tied to marriageability. For many families, female education was valued when it improved social status and made a woman a more desirable partner. It became threatening when it appeared to delay marriage, weaken male authority, or produce a woman seen as too independent. Sexual restraint was central to this older grammar. Young women were expected not only to avoid sexual scandal, but also to manage the appearance of sexual innocence. [8, 9].

The university sharpened these tensions. It offered freedom, mobility, friendships, urban life, fashion, student politics, and intellectual independence. Yet it also intensified surveillance. A male student's expensive phone, stylish clothes, or late-night movement may be read as youthful freedom. A female student displaying the same signs may be asked who funded them, whether she has a sponsor, or whether her lifestyle is sexually financed. This double standard shows that respectability is not simply about behaviour. It is about gendered interpretation.

Research on transactional sexual relationships among female students at the University of Cape Coast shows why intimate relationships often carry stigma. Such relationships may be constructed as long-term girlfriend relationships rather than prostitution, involving gifts, obligations, affection, and material support. The crucial point is not that female students are simply exchanging sex for money. It is that material intimacy becomes morally dangerous because female sexuality remains tied to reputation, family honour, and marriageability. [3, 4].

The older grammar of respectable femininity therefore joined education, sexuality, and class aspiration into one moral economy. A woman's education could elevate her status, but only if she remained sexually respectable. Her public visibility could signal modernity, but only if it did not become associated with sexual excess. Her ambition could be admired, but only if it did not undermine expectations of modesty and restraint. Soft life should therefore not be understood as a complete break from this older grammar. It is a reworking of its terms.

4. What Is Soft Life? Comfort, Beauty, and the New Language of Aspiration

Soft life is often used casually to describe comfort, ease, beauty, leisure, pleasure, and freedom from unnecessary suffering. Within Ghanaian university women's lives, however, it carries deeper social meaning. It is not simply a desire for luxury. It is a language through which young women articulate desires for comfort, care, dignity, emotional peace, romantic provision, bodily beauty, and class mobility. [1, 2].

This point matters because older models of respectable femininity often valued endurance. A respectable young woman was expected to work hard, remain modest, avoid scandal, endure emotional difficulty, and delay gratification in the hope of future reward through marriage, employment, professional success, or family honour. Soft life revises that moral economy. It suggests that a woman's worth should not be measured only by her willingness to suffer quietly. Comfort, care, beauty, and pleasure become part of the language through which young women claim value.

In Ghanaian university culture, soft life may appear in ordinary practices: dressing well for lectures, wearing expensive-looking hair, maintaining polished nails, using skincare products, eating at stylish restaurants, posting curated photographs, receiving gifts, or being taken on outings that signal care and status. It may be voiced in phrases such as I cannot suffer, I deserve better, I know my worth, or I want peace. These statements may sound playful, but they reveal a shift in feminine self-understanding. They move the ideal woman from one who merely endures to one who expects recognition and care.

Beauty is central to this imaginary. Hair, nails, clothes, fragrance, skin, makeup, body shape, and photography become part of feminine self-fashioning. They are not merely decorative. They communicate aspiration and social value. Research on young Ghanaian women shows that media exposure shapes

beauty perceptions, body image, and beauty choices. This is especially relevant for university women immersed in digital cultures of comparison. [10].

The university intensifies this visual economy. It is not only a place of academic learning; it is also a stage for class performance. Students encounter differences in family background, spending power, fashion, relationships, accommodation, phone brands, nightlife, and social networks. A woman who posts from a restaurant, receives flowers on her birthday, appears in carefully edited graduation photographs, or wears fashionable hair is not simply displaying consumption. She is positioning herself within a hierarchy of aspiration.

Yet soft life is unevenly accessible. Some students perform it through family resources. Others rely on small businesses, scholarships, part-time work, peer networks, or romantic support. Some can only perform it symbolically through captions, carefully selected outfits, borrowed items, or occasional outings. Soft life is therefore a classed form of aspiration. It expresses the desire to move beyond hardship, but it also exposes pressure to appear upwardly mobile before such mobility is materially secure. [11].

Soft life also reveals a quiet rebellion against the moral glorification of female suffering. In many gendered moral traditions, a good woman is admired for sacrifice: she endures hardship, remains loyal, suppresses desire, avoids public complaint, and places family or romantic obligations above her own comfort. Soft life unsettles this ideal. It insists that a woman should not have to prove virtue through suffering. Yet it is not purely liberating. If a woman's worth becomes tied to looking beautiful, appearing cared for, receiving gifts, or being publicly desirable, soft life can become another disciplinary standard. The same language that promises ease can produce anxiety.

5. Intimate Economies: Dating, Gifts, Provision, and Sexual Negotiation

The most delicate part of the soft-life discussion concerns romance, money, sexuality, and moral judgment. Public commentary often reduces young women's desire for comfort or material support to moral decline, sexual promiscuity, laziness, or greed. Such interpretations are too narrow. They reproduce the respectability politics this article seeks to analyse. To understand soft life, dating and material support must be examined as part of a wider field of intimate economies.

By intimate economies, this article refers to the social world in which affection, sex, gifts, emotional labour, financial support, mobility, beauty, status, and future expectations are negotiated within romantic and sexual relationships. The concept avoids reducing all forms of romantic provision to prostitution or transactional sex. It also avoids pretending that love and material support exist in separate worlds. A man's willingness to pay for food, transport, hair, data, rent, cosmetics, birthday gifts, or outings may be interpreted not merely as economic support, but as evidence of seriousness, care, masculinity, and commitment.

In Ghanaian student culture, such expectations appear in recognisable forms. A boyfriend may send mobile money for food, contribute to transport, buy airtime or data, help with hair appointments, pay for a birthday photoshoot, assist with rent, or provide support during examinations. These gestures may be framed as love, care, appreciation, responsibility, or showing seriousness. Yet they are rarely free of expectation. Gifts can create obligations; provision can shape sexual negotiation; and support can produce emotional dependence.

Ghana-focused scholarship gives this argument concrete grounding. Amo-Adjei, Kumi-Kyereme, and Tuoyire's study of female students at the University of Cape Coast shows that relationships involving gifts and obligations may be constructed as long-term girlfriend relationships rather than prostitution. Lifestyle desires may include hairdos, stylish clothing, Western foods, cell phones, and expensive gifts. These examples matter because they show how aspiration is embodied and displayed. A hairstyle, phone, or restaurant meal is not merely consumption. It can become a sign of being cared for, desired, modern, and upwardly mobile. [3].

Broader scholarship on transactional sex in sub-Saharan Africa supports this careful approach. Stoebenau and her co-authors distinguish between sex for basic needs, sex for improved social status, and material expressions of love. A student who receives money for food because she lacks basic support is not in the same situation as a student who seeks fashionable consumption or social prestige. A woman who receives gifts from a boyfriend in a mutually affectionate relationship is not necessarily operating within the same moral or economic logic as a woman who enters a relationship primarily for survival. [4].

Class background strongly shapes how relationships are read. A student from a visibly wealthy family may receive expensive gifts without immediate suspicion; her lifestyle may be explained through family privilege. A student from a poorer background displaying similar signs may be more easily accused of sexual exchange. Soft life is therefore classed not only in access, but also in interpretation. The same wig, phone, handbag, meal, or apartment can signify privilege for one woman and immorality for another.

Sexual negotiation sits at the heart of these intimate economies. Gifts and provision can affect a woman's ability to say yes, say no, delay sex, insist on condoms, end a relationship, or refuse unwanted intimacy. Not all gift-based relationships are coercive. But material dependence can complicate consent and negotiation. Research on sexual coercion among students at the University of Cape Coast demonstrates that university sexual cultures are shaped by unequal power, vulnerability, and negotiation. [12].

Soft life can therefore produce both agency and vulnerability. It may allow women to reject relationships that demand emotional labour without support. It may encourage them to

insist on being valued, cared for, and treated well. Yet it can also create dependency on men whose provision becomes tied to sexual access or control. This contradiction should not be resolved too quickly. It is precisely what makes soft life analytically important.

6. Social Media, Visibility, and the Performance of Class

Soft life is inseparable from visibility. It is not only lived; it is displayed, circulated, judged, and compared. For university women in Ghana, platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, Facebook, and WhatsApp status have become spaces where beauty, romance, consumption, class aspiration, and respectability are performed. These platforms do not merely reflect soft-life culture. They produce it by creating a visual language through which young women learn what comfort should look like, what beauty should require, and what upward mobility should appear to be.

This visibility matters because soft life is not simply about private comfort. It is also about being seen as someone who deserves comfort. The restaurant photograph, birthday photoshoot, bouquet, weekend trip, clean hostel room, mirror selfie, graduation shoot, new hairstyle, manicured nails, perfume bottle, iPhone, Uber ride, and caption about knowing one's worth all become signs within a broader economy of aspiration. They communicate not only enjoyment, but status.

This point connects university life to wider urban transformations. Quayson's study of Oxford Street in Accra shows how urban Ghanaian life is entangled with transnational signs, commercial display, leisure, and globalised consumption. Restaurants, boutiques, malls, salons, gyms, cafes, and nightlife spaces become sites where class is performed and imagined. Social media extends these urban performances into digital space. Ghana-focused studies of youth social media use also show that platforms are central to identity, information, entertainment, and participation. [13, 14].

The university intensifies this performance. Students compare hostels, clothes, phones, hairstyles, food choices, relationships, and weekend movements. A woman's social position may be shaped not only by academic performance, but also by how she looks, where she goes, who she dates, and what she can display. A student may post selectively from a restaurant even if such outings are rare; she may wear borrowed clothes for a birthday shoot, save money for a wig, or use captions that project confidence despite private financial struggle. These performances should not be dismissed as deception. They are aspirational practices.

Digital visibility also creates moral surveillance. A woman's image may be interpreted by classmates, relatives, church members, romantic partners, former schoolmates, strangers, and anonymous viewers. A photograph meant to express confidence may be read as sexual availability. A birthday gift may be read as evidence of sponsorship. A glamorous outing may be read as proof that a woman is being maintained by a man. Digital femininity therefore produces both agency and exposure. [15].

The Figure of the slay queen captures this tension. In Ghanaian popular discourse, the term often describes a young woman whose appearance, consumption, and digital visibility are judged as excessive or morally suspicious. The slay queen is imagined as someone whose lifestyle exceeds what her visible economic position can explain. The accusation polices both sexuality and class: Who paid for this beauty? Who funded this outing? Whose money produced this comfort? [16].

At the same time, social media can offer forms of agency. It allows women to control aspects of self-presentation, celebrate friendship, narrate achievement, market small businesses, build beauty brands, participate in motivational discourse, and challenge the expectation that women must suffer silently. Captions about peace, self-worth, self-care, and soft life may express a refusal of emotional exploitation. Social media, therefore, enables both discipline and resistance. Its dual role is what makes it central to the argument.

7. Class, Religion, Region, and Institutional Difference

A stronger analysis of soft life must resist treating university women in Ghana as a single social type. The phrase names a broad field of aspiration, but its meanings vary across class, religion, region, and institutional context. Soft life may circulate widely as an ideal, but the capacity to perform it and the moral consequences attached to it are unevenly distributed.

Class is the most visible difference. Students from wealthier homes may access restaurants, private hostels, branded phones, salon beauty, rides, and leisure spaces with fewer questions asked. Their comfort can be read as family privilege. Students from poorer or lower-middle-class backgrounds may face harsher suspicion when they display similar signs. The same aesthetic can therefore produce different judgments. Soft life exposes not only class inequality, but also the unequal credibility of women's claims to comfort.

Religious belonging adds another dimension, but it cannot be reduced to a uniform opposition between tradition and modernity. Church and mosque communities may shape ideals of modesty, marriage, duty, pleasure, and mutual care in distinctive ways. Without comparative interviews, the article does not claim to know how students of different faiths reconcile these expectations. Instead, it identifies religious affiliation as an important variable for future research.

Geography and institution type matter as well. Accra's commercial landscapes offer highly visible spaces of consumption; public and private universities, residential and commuter campuses, and institutions in Cape Coast, Kumasi, Tamale, Winneba, Ho, or Sunyani differ in resources, social networks, and local expectations. These are plausible sources of

variation, not evidence of measured differences. Comparisons across institutions could reveal when the same aesthetic signals care, privilege, independence, or suspected dependence.

This attention to difference prevents overgeneralisation. Soft life is not an identical experience for all university women. It is a contested vocabulary whose meaning changes depending on who uses it, where she is located, what resources she commands, what moral community surrounds her, and how her body and lifestyle are read. A publication-ready account must therefore analyse soft life as both shared discourse and uneven social practice.

8. The Moral Double Bind

The politics of soft life produces a moral double bind. University women are encouraged to be educated, stylish, socially polished, attractive, emotionally intelligent, and upwardly mobile. Yet when they perform this refinement too visibly - through expensive hair, fashionable clothing, restaurant outings, birthday shoots, social media posts, romantic gifts, or association with men who provide - they become vulnerable to suspicion. They must appear desirable but not sexually available; modern but not morally loose; ambitious but not arrogant; beautiful but not vain; supported but not dependent.

This double bind grows out of an older moral order in which female respectability was tied to sexual restraint, family reputation, modesty, marriageability, and religious discipline. What is new is the form in which this respectability is performed and policed. Earlier reputations were judged through church participation, family supervision, dress, movement in town, friendships with men, and local rumours. Contemporary university life adds social media visibility, campus gossip, peer comparison, and digital circulation.

The contradiction is clearest in relation to beauty. Ghanaian university women are often expected to look well-kept and socially presentable. Yet a student who dresses too fashionably, wears expensive hair, posts glamorous pictures, or appears frequently in leisure spaces may be judged as unserious, sexually loose, or financially dependent on men. Beauty is required, but the means of sustaining beauty are scrutinised.

The moral readability of beauty is classed. A wealthy student's expensive phone, salon hair, branded clothes, or weekend outing may be explained through family background. A poorer student displaying the same signs may be suspected of sexual exchange. The same hairstyle, restaurant photo, apartment, phone, or private ride can signify privilege for one woman and immorality for another.

The double bind is also sexual. A woman receiving financial help from a boyfriend is not automatically engaging in prostitution. At the same time, material support can create pressure, dependency, and sexual obligation. Women may need or desire support, yet support can expose them to stigma and vulnerability. They are judged for accepting provision, while often expected to remain attractive and emotionally available within relationships where male provision is treated as a sign of seriousness.

Soft life is therefore attractive and dangerous. It allows women to reject suffering, claim comfort, and perform aspiration. It also exposes them to accusations of materialism, sexual excess, dependency, and moral failure. The soft-life woman is admired and condemned at the same time. Understanding this contradiction prevents the analysis from becoming either celebratory or moralistic. Soft life is neither simple empowerment nor simple corruption. It is a contested strategy through which women navigate respectability, sexuality, economic uncertainty, and class desire.

9. Reworking, Not Replacing, Respectability

The language of soft life might appear to signal the decline of respectability among university women in Ghana. Its emphasis on comfort, beauty, leisure, romantic provision, and visible consumption seems to challenge older ideals of modesty, endurance, sexual restraint, and disciplined womanhood. Yet this appearance is misleading. Soft life does not mark the end of respectability. It marks its transformation.

To say that soft life replaces respectability would suggest a clean break between an older moral order and a newer culture of pleasure or consumption. The lived realities of university women are more complicated. A young woman may desire soft life while still wanting to be seen as respectable, marriageable, religious, academically serious, and professionally ambitious. She may post carefully styled photographs, accept gifts from a boyfriend, wear expensive hair, and speak about knowing her worthwhile also attending church, avoiding open scandal, maintaining family expectations, and imagining a future as a wife, professional, or mother.

Soft life reworks respectability by shifting the moral centre from endurance to entitlement. Older respectable femininity often praised women for patience, sacrifice, silence, and restraint. Soft life asks why women should suffer in order to be valued. It suggests that dignity may also be expressed through rest, beauty, pleasure, care, and material comfort. This is not simply consumerism. It is a gendered claim about what women deserve.

This is why soft life should be analysed as a new form of respectability politics. It does not free women from judgment; it gives them new ways to negotiate judgment. Older respectability required women to prove sexual discipline and moral seriousness. Soft-life respectability requires women to prove that their comfort is legitimate. The question is no longer only, Is she modest? It also becomes: Who paid for her lifestyle? Is she being sponsored? Is she serious about school? Is she independent? Is she still marriageable?

Soft life also reworks respectability through the body. Older respectable femininity valued bodily restraint: modest dress, controlled movement, sexual caution, and disciplined public appearance. Contemporary soft-life femininity continues to

discipline the body, but toward polish, visibility, and desirability. Hair, skin, nails, clothing, scent, body shape, and photographic presentation become part of how a woman communicates value. [17-19].

This does not mean that soft life liberates the body from control. It introduces new forms of control. A woman may feel compelled to maintain a certain appearance to be taken seriously, admired by peers, desired by men, or included in social circles. She may feel pressure to look expensive even when she lacks money. Soft life challenges older ideals of modest endurance, but it creates new demands of beauty, presentation, and emotional composure.

At the same time, soft life can be read as part of a wider African feminist insistence that women's sexual, emotional, and bodily lives cannot be reduced to victimhood, morality, or disease. Public feminist writing by African women has insisted on complexity, pleasure, self-narration, and agency. This matters because soft life is not only a story of consumption. It is also a struggle over who gets to define women's dignity and desire. [20].

Soft life therefore both challenges and reproduces patriarchal expectations. It challenges patriarchy by refusing female suffering as virtue. It insists that women deserve care, pleasure, and comfort. Yet it may reproduce patriarchy when access to comfort depends on male provision, romantic desirability, or sexualised class display. This contradiction should not be treated as a weakness in the argument. It is the argument. Soft life is powerful precisely because it is ambiguous.

10. Conclusion: Soft Life as a Gendered Politics of Aspiration

Soft life is not a trivial slogan. It is a serious social language through which university women in Ghana name their desire for comfort, dignity, recognition, care, beauty, emotional peace, and upward mobility. Its appeal lies in its refusal of hardship as a feminine destiny. In a society where women have often been praised for endurance, sacrifice, modesty, and sexual restraint, soft life introduces a different claim: women deserve ease, pleasure, protection from unnecessary suffering, and a life that visibly affirms their value.

This article has argued that soft life should not be understood as the disappearance of respectability. It is better understood as respectability's contemporary reworking under conditions of economic uncertainty, digital visibility, intimate economies, and class aspiration. Older respectable femininity in Ghana valued education, moral discipline, religious propriety, family honour, marriageability, sexual restraint, and professional ambition. Contemporary soft-life femininity rearranges these ideals around beauty, comfort, self-worth, romantic provision, emotional peace, social media visibility, and class performance.

The broader implication is that soft life belongs to African feminist theory, youth politics, and debates on neoliberal aspiration. It reveals how young women make claims on the good life when the older promises of education, morality, and class mobility have become unstable. University education still carries the promise of social advancement, but it no longer guarantees secure employment or middle-class stability. Under these conditions, soft life becomes a way of imagining the good life before that life is materially secure. [21, 22].

The article has also shown that soft life is not simply liberating. Women who pursue or perform it may be admired for beauty, confidence, and self-worth, but they may also be judged as materialistic, sexually loose, lazy, dependent, or morally unserious. The same society that expects young women to appear polished and upwardly mobile can condemn them when the costs of that polish become visible. This is the moral double bind at the heart of soft-life femininity.

Soft life, then, is not what comes after respectability. It is what respectability becomes when university women are expected to be educated, attractive, morally careful, digitally visible, romantically selective, economically aspirational, and emotionally composed all at once. It is a new grammar of feminine value written over older scripts of discipline and restraint. Its power lies in its contradiction: it offers women a language for refusing suffering, but it also places them under new pressures to perform comfort convincingly and respectably.

A next step is a comparative study using voluntary, confidential interviews at different public and private universities, supported by ethically collected and systematically sampled public digital material. Such research could test whether students use "soft life" chiefly to describe financial independence, family assistance, romantic provision, or freedom from hardship, and whether class, faith, locality, or institution changes those meanings.

To study soft life is therefore to study how Ghanaian university women imagine the good life in a world where the promises of education, morality, and class mobility remain powerful but uncertain. It is to study gendered citizenship at the intimate level: in captions, hair, gifts, campus gossip, family expectations, romantic negotiations, and the desire to live beautifully without apology.

Author Contributions

Patricius Nana Mensah: Conceptualization, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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