What it Takes to Live This Lifestyle: An Investigation into Black Women's Identity Progression When Practicing Soft Life

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What it Takes to Live This Lifestyle:

An Investigation into Black Women’s Identity Progression

When Practicing Soft Life

Monique Fontella Pollock

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To the moms and aunties who did their best, teaching us young ladies how to be strong: Your lessons on resilience, while training our eagle vision to see the truth, has protected us in the most challenging of situations in which the world has offered us. We thank you. To my mom, Geraldine Weeks Pollock, thank you for being a soft place to land, when the world gave me the hard stuff you prepared me for. To my dad, Frankie H. Pollock, Sr., thank you for believing in women as leaders. This gives me courage to balance my sugar with the spice when I take center stage. To my big brother, Frankie H. Pollock, Jr., thanks for never discouraging me from following in your footsteps, as they may have been “for the boys,” but they were actually for the strong.
Abstract

The Strong Black Woman schema has served the Black woman well in modern history, as it has given formidable warnings to all others that this demographic cannot be easily defeated. What would make this intersection, female and Black, needing of this title? Possibly as Malcolm X stated in one of his most famous speeches, “The most disrespected person in America is the Black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the Black woman. The most neglected person in America is the Black woman” (X, 1962). Even with these obstacles, Black women have gone on record to lead in entrepreneurship in America as they are seeking more freedom, opportunity, fulfillment and stability as well as avoiding discrimination barriers in the workplace (Thompson, 2022). How can they attain such a lead with so much against them? Strength training has been a tactic taught in early childhood for many Black women, however, being strong grows tiresome and the identity that comes along with it has become unappealing. The soft life era has emerged and offered a new option and identity shift for Black women. This paper will explore how Black women grew into identities focusing on strength and how they are making room for other options with the emergence of the soft life phenomenon.

Keywords: Strong Black Woman, soft life, identity
BLACK WOMEN’S IDENTITY PROGRESSION

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List of Abbreviations

Black Feminist Thought (BFT)

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Ecological Systems Theory (EST)

Strong Black Woman (SBW)
Many Black women have been socialized within their homes and communities, as well as through various forms of media, to present themselves strong as a means of psychological protection against societal oppression (Jones, Harris et al., 2021). Black girls are many times taught in childhood to embody the strong Black woman (SBW) schema, an archetype of the ideal Black woman characterized by emotional restraint, independence, and caretaking. Strong Black women (SBW) are emotionally restrained and independent as to not appear weak. They are to care for and be responsible for others, even at the expense of their own mental, emotional and physical well-being (Jones, Harris et al., 2021).

Many parents and guardians have “the talk” with Black girls to prepare them to be SBW with the intent to protect them from the prejudice and aggression that they often experience in society (Jones, Womack et al., 2021). According to Davis and Jones (2021), through ongoing messages, the SBW schema becomes part of Black girls and women’s identity. The intersection of race and gender become fundamental to Black women’s identities and they often identify as Strong Black Women. Research shows that Black women have been trained to include strength as a primary building block of their identity. Abrams, Hill et al., (2019) describe this strong Black woman Schema being a combination of beliefs and cultural expectations of resilience, independence, and strength that formulate decision making, thinking, and behavioral responses related to being and identifying as a Black woman.
Media reinforces the SBW stereotype across various popular platforms. This creates a monolithic picture of Black woman as aggressive, angry, and sassy while negating the softer aspects of roles and personalities they can occupy in society (Jerald et al., 2017). Wallace-Sanders (2008) also noted that the depiction of Black women in Hollywood overwhelmingly embodies the mammy figure, in which the SBW cares for others without or with little care for herself. This role additionally serves the interests of a white protagonist. For example, in movies a strong Black woman may be cast as the best friend to a white woman leading character. Through continued exposure to the SBW stereotypes in media, Black girls and women’s SBW schema is further built and reinforced. As a result, the schema is further integrated into Black girls and women’s identities throughout their growth.

Although the SBW socialization and integration of the SBW schema into identity can have a positive impact on Black women, protecting them from oppression, Black feminists also discussed how the SBW schema holds Black women to an unrealistic and unachievable standard (Jones, Harris et al., 2021). Black women adopting this idea into their identity can align with self-induced trauma (Abrams, Hill et al., 2019). Internalization of the SBW schema into their identity results in avoiding any display of weakness that their white women counterparts are typically allowed to demonstrate. Thus, Black women attempting to uphold a SBW identity often experience psychological consequences, such as stress and decreased well-being (Jones, Womack et al., 2021). Across various empirical studies, researchers have documented the SBW schema as a contributor to Black women’s depression (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007). Further, Black women also trend toward higher rates, in proportion, to their white counterparts, from
high blood pressure to heart disease, as well as other mental and physical health issues (Payton, 2023).

**Problem of Practice**

Black women are generally socialized toward the SBW stereotype in their families, communities, and media. They, in turn, often internalize this schema and integrate it into their identities, identifying as SBW. This internalization and identity integration results in professional and personal consequences. For example, Jones, Womack et al. (2021) explored how Black women in the workplace experience workplace stress, and how they feel pressured to modify their behaviors and appearance, leading to decreased psychological well-being. Furthermore, Black women also experience mental and emotional stress disorders disproportionately (Abrams, Hill et al., 2019; Spates et al., 2020). However, admitting professional and personal struggles goes against the idealized concept of the SBW schema and stereotype. Baldwin (2021) reported her own struggles in “Presumed Nonhuman- Black Women Intellectuals and the Struggle for Humanity in the Academy,” in withholding her emotions to avoid being caricaturized due to her internal rage involving personal job grievances.

Recently, the phenomenon of “soft life” has emerged providing Black women with an avenue to mitigate negative consequences of the SBW schema and as a motivator to restructure their schema and identities. Zee Clarke, author of “Black People Breathe,” described this disruptive phenomenon in L’Oreal Payton’s 2023 article “It’s time to leave the Strong Black Woman trope in the past. Meet the Soft Black Girl.” Clarke stated;

“From the moment I was born, I felt like I had to be a strong Black woman…I was thinking recently about how Black women don’t have models for rest because
our mothers didn’t rest. Our grandmothers didn’t rest. And when you go back to the times of slavery, we took care of white women’s children and then went home to take care of our own. That comes with a lot of fatigue and exhaustion, so the status quo becomes overworking and not taking care of yourself (paragraph 6).”

For generations, Black women have prioritized being physically, emotionally, and mentally strong as a means of survival (Payton, 2023.) However, Clarke (2023) noted that soft life in media highlights that Black women do not need to be strong or adopt the SBW identity. Noting that soft life focuses on Black women’s authentic strength, found in their vulnerability and softness. Lorde (1988) proclaimed, “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation and that is an act of political warfare,” (p. 130). Embracing soft life and letting go of the SBW identity may help to improve the mental and physical health of Black women (Payton, 2023). As a result of this phenomenon, Black women increasingly have adopted this lifestyle, re-branding it “soft life” in early 2022 (Williams, 2022).

Defining soft life is difficult as the term is new and not discussed in empirical literature. Most discussion about this topic is in popular press literature and magazines. This is partially because soft life recently emerged in media as a phrase originated in a Nigerian social media community. Oni (2022) explained that in the Nigerian pidgin dialect, “soft” has been used as a word to describe enjoyment. The phrase progressed in the online community from there in recent years. Oni (2022) explained that it is not simply superficial and based on luxuries money can buy, but more on seeking a stress-free and joyful life.
Soft life includes a focus on the rejection of hustle culture. This intentional rejection has been explained by Tricia Hersey (2022). She proclaimed that rest is anything that connects mind and body, which unravels white supremacy and capitalism. Rest, a key element of soft life, is an act of social justice and is a public health issue (Hersey, 2022). Hersey said that rest pushes back against humans being seen as machines, productions tools, and solely useful for labor, which has perpetuated a long history of poor physical and mental health, especially for Black women (Hersey, 2022). The Washington Informer (2023) described soft life as a life where an individual intentionally avoids stress and embraces ease, and a pathway in which the SBW ideology and its consequences may be mitigated.

Therefore, drawing from the literature, soft life is defined as choosing to live a life that mitigates struggle and stress (Bowser, 2023); and adopting femininity, using lifestyle practices for self-care (Williams, 2022). In essence, the adoption of thoughts [cognitive], behaviors, and feelings focused on an individual’s personal care, enjoyment, pleasure, and peace is paramount. Moreover, the rejection of thoughts [cognitive], behaviors, and feelings focused on hustle culture (i.e., the glorification of productivity, working hard, and working long hours at the expense of an individual’s mental and physical health) are minimized. According to Williams (2022), Black women who view soft life through social media (e.g., Instagram, YouTube, TikTok) and then adopt a soft life, are intentionally choosing to be less productive and detach their self-worth from being highly productive as defined by hustle culture (e.g., the focus on working, making money, etc.). Black women who adopt soft life also identify practices and make life decisions focused on their own enjoyment, pleasure, and peace.
Soft life as a lifestyle focuses on self-love and self-care, which are elements researchers have identified as needed in the lives of Black women if they are to mitigate the negative effects of the SBW identity (Quashie, 2004). Quashie (2004) noted that Black women need to adopt practices of self-love, self-origin and self-authorship and move away from an identity that centralizes race and gender. The adoption of soft life is one way in which Black women are beginning to do this.

Some Black women, as described in popular press literature, are beginning to discuss how soft life is transforming their development, including their practices, schema, and identities. Soft life is a motivating development, “a lasting change in the way in which a person [the Black woman] perceives and deals with his [her] environment” and “evolving conception of the ecological environment” and her relation to it (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p.9). Development is inclusive of identity, which is a process of understanding one’s sense of self, while interacting with others, which is the primary focus of development in this study (Hills, 2019). The scholarly literature has been minimal on soft life, and Black women’s identity as they interact with it. Therefore, this gap in soft life literature provides an opportunity for further exploration.

**Purpose Statement**

This qualitative, transcendental phenomenological (Moustakas, 1994) study examined Black women’s experience of reimagining their SBW identities through exposure and adoption of soft life. This study, in alignment with the qualitative approach, limits the scope of participation. The study is delimited to a sample to Black women who have used soft life to transform their SBW identities. For this study, a minimum of ten participants were requested to potentially participate. They met the following criteria: 1) Identify and
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phenotypically present as a Black woman, 2) Personally identified at some point throughout life with the SBW schema, 3) Has been exposed to soft life in media, and 4) Consciously chose soft life lifestyle characteristics. The phenomenon is Black women’s lived experiences with soft life and how this experience has informed, if at all, their identity development or reimagining of themselves as Black women, namely their SBW identities.

Significance of the Study

Understanding the experience of Black women with soft life media and the potentially transformative elements of soft life in media can further inform Black women, as well as other members of society, on how media has shaped their schema and ultimately their identities. This understanding can inform Black women to be more cognizant of how the media they consume may be harmful or helpful. This understanding can also inform media creators and instructional designers about the importance and ways to develop content that represents a broader range of identities within a specific demographic. Moving away from imagery that pigeonholes Black women into specific roles, responsibilities, and identities, and opening up a range of emotions and abilities.

The goal of this transcendental phenomenological study was to provide empirical and practical relevance to Black women, instructional designers, media and content developers. From this study, Black women can gain a better understanding of the necessity of cultivating a life of their choosing, free of stress and expectations of strength from an upbringing that may have idealized SBW (Payton, 2023). This study demonstrated the lived experiences of women who made this transition successfully and
demonstrate the underworking’s of Black women as individuals, needing a light shined upon their diversity.

From a practical standpoint, this research study also provided instructional designers and media developers with a deeper understanding of the inappropriate influence SBW stereotypes portrayed in media have on Black women. The study further demonstrated how soft life in media, as opposed to only SBW, can impact the identity, mental, emotional, and physical health/well-being of these individuals more positively. This provides the visual example for expansion within the lives of Black women, growing their ideas, thoughts, actions, and identity. The historical context of SBW was included as it was imperative in laying the foundation for the frustrations leading to SBW and in turn soft life. Given the deficiency of empirical literature on soft life, this study began building the foundation of literature on this topic, adding to identity and feminist theories that explore Black women.

**Theoretical Framework**

The ecological systems theory (EST) guided this study as Bronfenbrenner (1977) described the interactions between individuals and their social environment are reciprocal, influencing human development. He identified five social environment levels (i.e., the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem, and the chronosystem). Among them, three systems are paramount to this study. These include; the early family influence in the home (microsystem), mass media influence (exosystem), and influence from the culture (macrosystem). Many Black women have been influenced to be SBW by their microsystem, exosystem, and/or macrosystem. However, exposure to
soft life media, an exosystem, has the ability to expand and transform Black women’s SBW schema and, ultimately, their identity development.

Figure 1
Ecological Systems Theory Model

Note: The Ecological Systems Theory model demonstrates the transfer of influences between interacting environments within an individual’s home, community and the culture. See appendix L for EST model based on Black youth for relevant context.

While EST was first applied to research without a primary focus on Black women, it has since been more broadly applied, including studies on Black women (Morton, 2021; Noursi et al., 2020; Spencer, 2007). Respectively, “Using Ecological Systems Theory to Understand Black/White Disparities in Maternal Morbidity and Mortality in the United States,” “A Phenomenological and Ecological Perspective on the Influence of Undergraduate Research Experiences on Black Women’s Persistence in STEM at an HBCU,” and “Phenomenology and Ecological Systems Theory:
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Development of Diverse Groups.”

Although EST can be applied effectively to Black studies and research, a supporting framework based in Black women’s ideologies also informed this study. Black feminist thought (Collins, 2009) focused on topics directly related to the reimagining of identity possibilities for Black women as it pertains to this research. These include work, family, Black women’s oppression, the mammy figure, matriarchs, controlling images, and the self-defining power of Black womanhood. Similar to and extending Bronfenbrenner ideologies, Collins (2009) purported that identity elements of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nationality are intersecting, mutually constructing systems of power and informing Black women’s identities.

The term intersectionality, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, is described as simultaneous overlapping of multiple oppressions for matrix of domination. According to Collins (2000), Crenshaw specifically defined intersectionality as, “analysis claiming that systems of race, social class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, and age form mutually constructing features of social organization, which shape Black women’s experiences and, in turn, are shaped by Black women” (p. 299). In studying Black women and media, this concept of intersectionality as an analytical tool is important as it highlights the social inequality, power relations, relationality, social context, complexity, and social justice issues related to their interactions with the systems Bronfenbrenner notes as important to development, and namely for his study in identity development. Therefore, the present study uses the Bronfenbrenner’s theory and BFT to guide the inquiry and more specifically develop the data collection methods and analysis.

As previously noted, the phenomenon is Black women’s lived experiences with
soft life and how this experience has informed, if at all, their identity development. In addition, the phenomenon also allows for reimagining of themselves as Black women, namely their SBW identities. Pausing to explore identity further, Jones and McEwen (2000) conceptualized and suggested that individuals have multiple social identity dimensions that intersect. Within this model and its extensions, identity is admittedly dynamic and complex (Abes et al., 2007). The core sense of self, “an individual’s values and most valued attributes and characteristics,” is centralized (Jones, 1997, p. 383).

Surrounding the core, and sometimes connected to the core, are externally defined identities such as gender, race, and culture, which are similar to Bronfenbrenner circles of influence developed in EST. Identities are illustrated as intersecting circles around the core sense of self, signifying that “no one dimension may be understood singularly; it can be understood only in relation to other dimensions,” (Jones & McEwen, 2000, p. 410). The development and ownership of each identity is dynamic, influenced by personal lenses through which individuals see the world, context, and experience (e.g., family, sociocultural conditions, academic disciplines) (Abes et al., 2007).

Meaning-making is also a poignant consideration as it influences the relationship between one’s identities. Abes and Jones (2004) described meaning-making as “organizational assumptions that determine whether identity is constructed through external expectations or an internally generated sense of self,” (p. 619). Through their research, Abes and Jones determined that meaning-making is the defining factor in how contextual factors shape the content of identity, depending on the individual’s internal satisfaction or dissatisfaction of how this context influences their multiple identities. This meaning-making filter that was conceptualized through Abes and Jones’ study
strengthens Jones’ and McEwen’s (2000) contextually-based theory of multiple dimensions of identity by solidifying the role that context and societal influences play and in dimensions of identity.

The concept of intersectionality, drawn from critical race theory (CRT), further illuminates the importance of the intersection of identities and emphasized the “interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies” (Davis, 2008, p. 68). Thus, this concept is not only consistent with the view of multiple identities (Abes et al., 2007; Jones & McEwen, 2000) in that it purports that that identities are formed in relation to one another, and the process of merging various identities is transformative, but it also highlights the idea that context and social interaction are influential in the development and intersection of identities.

The probing of identity through Jones and McEwen’s model exemplifies potential struggles between Black women’s SBW identity and the forthcoming or adoption of soft life and the aspects of it within. As soft life is defined as choosing to live a life that mitigates struggle and stress, adopting femininity, and using the practice of lifestyle hacks and self-care (Bowser, 2023; Williams, 2022). With the adoption of thoughts [cognitive], behaviors, and feelings focused on an individual’s personal care, enjoyment, pleasure, and peace is paramount, soft life can appear as a rejection of SBW rather than an addition to. Moreover, soft life highlights the rejection of thoughts [cognitive], behaviors, and feelings focused on the glorification of productivity, working hard, and working long hours at the expense of an individual’s mental and physical health (known as hustle culture) are minimized. Finding the successful overlap of these identities can be
an undertaking that this research can reveal.

**Research Questions**

The following questions and sub-questions guided the research to understand the problem of practice.

1. **RQ1**: How do Black women describe the Strong Black Woman (SBW)?
   
i. **SQ1**: In what places, if any, have they learned about the SBW?
   
ii. **SQ2**: How have they integrated the SBW schema into their identities?

2. **RQ2**: How do Black women define soft life?
   
i. **SQ1**: How have they constructed a soft life for themselves?

3. **RQ3**: What significant soft life experiences, both positive effect and negative, influence Black women to construct or reconstruct ideas about their lived realities?
   
i. **SQ1**: How do Black women’s experiences with soft life, assist Black women in developing and changing their identities as SBW?

**Definitions**

The following terms and definitions provided additional context for this study:

- *Black feminist thought*: Research regarding the intersection of being Black and female in terms of their existence, perception, stereotypes, roles, and societal responsibilities (Collins, 2009).
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- **Code-switching**: Altering how one acts so as not to confirm stereotypes about one’s social group (Jones, Womack et al., 2021).

- **Composite textural description**: Composite textural descriptions are developed through compiling individual textural descriptions. Invariant meanings and themes of each co-researcher are used to formulate one thought as a whole group (Moustakas, 1994).

- **Ecological systems**: The ecology of human development involves the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation between an active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings where a developing person lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

- **Ecological systems theory**: A framework that states interactions between individuals and their social environment are reciprocal, and that behavior is affected by levels of influence (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

- **Exosystem**: An exosystem refers to one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant, but in which events occur that affect, or are affected by, what happens in the setting where the developing person resides (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

- **Individual textural description**: Individual themes and delimited horizons of each participant’s experience are shared and transcribed (Moustakas, 1994).

- **Individual structural description**: Individual structural descriptions provide explicit accounts of underlying dynamics and experience; it is how feelings and thoughts are connected (Moustakas, 1994).
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- **Macrosystem**: The macrosystem refers to consistencies, including the systems (micro-, meso-, and exo-) that exist, or could exist, involving the subculture or the culture as a whole, along with belief systems or ideologies underlying the constant exposure (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

- **Mesosystem**: A mesosystem involves the interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

- **Microsystem**: A microsystem is a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting, with specific physical and material characteristics (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

- **Soft life**: Choosing to live a life that mitigates struggle and stress (Bowser, 2023), adopting femininity, and using the practice of lifestyle hacks and self-care (Williams, 2022). The adoption of thoughts [cognitive], behaviors, and feelings focused on an individual’s personal care, enjoyment, pleasure, and peace is paramount. Moreover, the rejection of thoughts [cognitive], behaviors, and feelings focused on hustle culture. (i.e., the glorification of productivity, working hard, and working long hours at the expense of an individual’s mental and physical health) are minimized.

- **Strong Black woman**: A combination of beliefs and cultural expectations of unyielding resilience, independence, and strength that guide meaning making, cognition, and behavior related to Black womanhood (Jones, Harris et al., 2021).
Chapter 1 presented a background on the topic of SBW and soft life. Specifically, it introduced the problem of practice, the purpose statement, the significance of the study, and the theoretical framework. The chapter ended with the research questions that guided this study and key definitions. Chapter 2 presents the Literature Review for this study.
Chapter Two presents the literature review for this study. The purpose of this study was to investigate the identity development of Black women exposed to and adopting soft life. Additionally, the study explored their experiences central to their SBW identity or reconstruction after exposure and adoption. This literature review examines the ecological systems a framework for understanding the formation of Black girls; schema and identity, especially as Strong Black Women (SBW).

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter begins with a review of ecological systems theory and Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2009). It then presents a review of the factors that can impact the SBW phenomenon, followed by the origins and elements of soft life. The chapter concludes with solutions through research.

The perceptions of Black women, some due to systematic stereotypes and media influence can promote identity shifting and code switching as a way for Black women to distance themselves from the identity assumptions (Collins, 2009; Jones, Womack et al., 2021).

This study examined Black women who identify with and/or strive to live a soft life due to life experiences that have caused them stress. Soft life is a new term for a type of self-care, primarily adopted by Black women, emerging from the Nigerian influencer community in mid-2022 (Williams, 2022).

Theoretical Concepts

Ecological Systems Theory

This study is guided by ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1974). Bronfenbrenner’s theory on ecological systems is described as layers nested within each
other that describe growth of a human and their changing environments. Macrosystem, mesosystem, and particularly the exosystem, which encompasses the environment where a person can typically be found, can correlate to the primary environments where the SBW schema is manifested in Black womanhood. These include major institutions of society such as work, a neighborhood, mass media, government, and social networks. Adkins-Jackson et al. (2019) state that these systems expose some black women to stress, which in addition to the impact of socioeconomic status, can cause adverse health effects.

As Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) framework covers a wide range of interpersonal interactions within the layers (see Figure 1 in Chapter 1). Focusing on three layers will capture the early family influence in the home (microsystem), mass media influence (exosystem), and influence from the culture (macrosystem). Starting early, Bronfenbrenner (1979) stated that most immediate environmental events are potent in affecting a person’s development. These are the activities that are engaged in by others, with that individual or in the influencer’s presence. Active engagement in, or just exposure to what others are doing, often inspires the person to take on similar activities on their own. These events would happen within the microsystem. This would be situated with early life lessons, such as “the talk,” preparing Black women for the world and society standards ahead of them.

Starting with the inner most setting, Bronfenbrenner’s Russian dolls would be the home or the classroom. Then the next layer involves the relation between the two. Bronfenbrenner (1977) then goes on to address the impact of an individual’s life based on the life of the others that surround them. An individual’s culture is also addressed as a level of influence over an individual’s life. The final layer is time, as it pertains to the
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lifespan of a person, and the changes that occur between them and others over the course of their life (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Considering where the ideals of Black womanhood stem from, looking at childhood and “the talk,” may offer insight into the development of a SBW. In examining child ecology, Bronfenbrenner (1974) discussed two layers within a child’s developmental environment. The upper layer, which is the most visible, is the child’s immediate setting such as home, school or playgrounds. Within these settings are three dimensions including design, roles of people, and activities in which the children engage in. The surrounding second layer shapes what occurs within the immediate setting. Examples include the type of home setting in which a child resides and the types of services received. Services are important to consider because they impact the lives of the individual, such as health and homemaker services (Bronfenbrenner, 1974).

Taking a further look at how young Black girls are urged toward specific identities, Bronfenbrenner and Evan’s (2000) concept of exposure may help explain it. They defined exposure as the extent of contact maintained between a developing person and a proximal process, which are methods that produce outcomes, either competence or dysfunction. Competence involves knowledge and skill on how to conduct one’s behavior and dysfunction involves the difficulty of maintaining control of behaviors within various situations life could bring during development. Duration (how long), frequency (how often), timing (when action toward response is delivered), intensity (consistency or lack of proximal processes), are the dimensions within exposure. During interviews of participants, understanding when, how often, and how long those parental “talks” that trained Black girls to embrace resiliency, can give key information on their development
and adoption of the SBW. Additionally, it can reveal how they applied it to survival in the workforce.

There is a second view of proximal process studied by Bronfenbrenner and Evan (2000). It is described as a developmental outcome that appears later in life, due to exposure of a process in a particular environmental setting. They ask the following question as an example: If a person is progressively exposed to increasingly difficult challenges over time, will their skills increase due to those experiences? Considering the data involving the difficulties and challenges of Black women, a similar question can be raised: If Black women manage progressively more difficult situations over time, will it lead to the embodiment and actualization of the Strong Black Woman? Although Black women may be prepared for these challenges, it does not necessarily support their well-being. In a study by Stanton et al., (2017), their data revealed evidence that young Black women endorsing SBW ideals are more associated with symptoms of mental health and low self-esteem.

There are four definitions that are used to define the study of ecology as part of EST. The scientific study of the ecology of human development is firstly defined as the progressive mutual communications, throughout a lifetime, between a human growing through life and the immediate environments in which they live that are ever changing. This process is affected by relationships acquired within these immediate settings, as well as in larger social contexts, both formal and informal where influence can be embedded (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

The second definition, “The ecological environment is conceived topologically as a nested arrangement of structures, each contained within the next,” has been described
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through the imagery of Russian dolls (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 514). These Russian
dolls of multiple sizes, each fitting inside the other, are symbolic of the layers within the
circle of development. These include individual (microsystem), interpersonal
(mesosystem), community (exosystem), societal (macrosystem), and stage of life
(chronosystem) (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

As perception has a huge impact on how Black women experience the world due
to other’s perceptions, as well as their own, Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) third definition
provided support to why the EST framework is aligned well with scholarly research on
the Black woman’s environment. The definition states that ecological validity refers to
the extent to which the environment is understood by a human, or their perception of it.
When applying this to research, it is imperative to consider the environment in which
observations are being made. A laboratory or prescribed setting may not yield the same
results as a natural environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Keeping this in mind, a use for
communicating with Black women in environments that represent their struggles, may
yield more accurate accounts than ones in which they feel safe.

The fourth definition Bronfenbrenner (1977) provided speaks to the contrast of
operating between environmental systems. Specifically:

An ecological experiment is an effort to investigate the progressive
accommodation between the growing human organism and its environment
through a systematic contrast between two or more environmental systems or
their structural components, with a careful attempt to control other sources of
influence either by random assignment (contrived experiment) or by matching
(natural experiment). (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 517)
This system provided a framework to identify where and when the instilling of Black women’s identity, as it pertains to SBW tropes and defense concerning racial injustice preparation begins. This points to an area to rectify and redirect the harsh realities of Black women’s life experiences and move them toward a softer life experience. Accurate accounts are needed to get a true read of how Black women moving toward a soft life felt in environments that did not support their mental, emotional or personal standards, compared to those that provide ease.

Not only are there varying definitions for the study of ecology overall, there are also definitions that help define interconnected systems within the framework. Thus, the last focus for this framework is on the interconnected system. The principle of interconnectedness is seen as applying not only within settings, but with equal force and consequence in which a developing person actually participates. The three interconnected systems are the mesosystem, the ecosystem, and the macrosystem. These systems are layered and nested within each other and can function in similar ways.

Application of Ecological Systems Theory

Broadening the EST framework, nature versus nurture, is a point that can be added to the investigation as to why Black women feel compelled to claim the SBW title in the first place. Prior to Black women’s SBW disassociation, SBW was, and can still be, a proud declaration. Abrams, Maxwell et al., (2014) state that SBW was birthed in response to the harsh realities of race and gender intersectional oppression during enslavement. The SBW Schema is a combination of beliefs and cultural expectations of unyielding resilience, independence, and strength that guide meaning making, cognition,
and behavior related to Black womanhood (Abrams, Maxwell et al., 2014). As a result of continuously calling upon resilience as a response to physical and psychological hardships, many Black women have perfected the art of portraying strength while concealing trauma. This balancing act is many times held in high esteem among Black women (Abrams, Maxwell et al., 2014).

To begin the inclusion of this ideal, understanding hereditability is essential, as making a claim that Black women are predisposed by nature to be strong could open a polarizing scientific discussion. Heredity is defined as the proportion of “the total phenotypic that is due to additive genetic variation” (Cavalli-Sforza & Bodmer, 1971, p. 536). Even if there were truths to the heritability factor, Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (1994) state that there are cons to this approach. For example, it addresses actualized potential, but not non-actualized potential, leaving the total potential of a person unknown. Additionally, it only deals with individual’s differences and does not reveal competence around what the individual variance is occurring (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994).

Overall neither hereditability, nor proximity by nurture, tell the whole story. For example, increases in environmental factors could then lead to increased genetic factors. Bronfenbrenner and Ceci cite the example of increased height of second-generation Japanese persons raised by short and tall Japanese fathers in the United States, as opposed to those raised by short and tall Japanese fathers in Japan. They claim nutrition as the reason for the increase. Applying this to young Black girls in childhood, being raised by Black women mothers, there is room to accept that environmental (social and/or economic) factors can have impacts on the mothers, causing a change in their daughter’s nature, outside of their informal teaching. This reality brings the necessity of this research
to the forefront, to ensure that the SBW Schema is an optional demeanor, rather than an inherited personality trait.

Moving on to another developmental area, proximal process refers to the transfer of energy between a developing human being and the persons, objects or symbols within their immediate environment. It is divided into two major types of developmental outcomes, competence and dysfunction (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). In looking at the identity formation of Black women, SBW leans towards the competence side of proximal development, in which the development, knowledge, and skill or the ability to conduct one’s own behavior, is displayed across situations and developmental domains. The outcomes of these developments can be apparent in their physical, motivational, socioemotional, or artistic activities (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). This coincides with the persistence toward emotional and psychological perfection that Black women, adopting SBW, hold themselves to, as they were taught or as they identified with due to influence.

Dysfunction refers to difficulties maintaining control, and integration of behavior throughout situations and different domains of development (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). The reality of not holding one’s life together, impacting demeanor, behavior and control as a Black woman, can cause stress as reported through Graham et al., (2022). An extremely candid comment was captured in Vassar and Barnett’s (2020) phenomenological study about the psychological and emotional state of Black women faculty at an institution. One participant admitted not only to the distrust of white counterparts, due to their failing to see the exemplary work of Black faculty. 75% of the participants admitted to a competition among Black women, which disallows solidarity,
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minimizes collective struggle, and decreases camaraderie. They spoke of challengers of the system being a target of dismissal, in which another Black woman would be ready to take their place. Alone without friends at work, these Black women report working harder, and not being able to get together due to time. However, one participant reported it was probably for the best due to the environment, they were not able to trust their fellow Black female colleagues either (Vassar & Barnett, 2020).

These SBW pressures, demonstrated by the literature and the history of Black women in the U.S., are beginning to be disrupted. Spates et al. (2020) investigated the coping strategies of Black women, as it pertains to gendered racism. Prior to their research, it was already known that Black women relied heavily on their network including family, friends and church. However, their findings identified four major themes for coping including: redefining Black womanhood, employing overt and covert forms of resistance, relying on faith, prayer, and the pursuit of balance, and expressing their thoughts and feelings in safe spaces (Spates et al., 2020). As the phenomenon of soft life emerged, and has continued to grow traction, these themes and more have surfaced to help Black women move away from the negative consequences of SBW and toward a life of ease, decreased stress, lavishness, and balance. The path to the positive shift in personal identity, or the adopting of a new personal identity provided guidance on the semi-structured questions for the participants in this research.

Black Feminist Thought

Black Feminist Thought, by Patricia Hill Collins, speaks to the freedom Black women seek, even if it is in her own mind (Collins, 2009). It speaks to the desire for Black women to be a different version of themselves, other than what they know. Black
feminist thought (BFT), as an additional framework, offers insight into the perception of Black women and the training of the Strong Black Woman (SBW). Aligning BFT with EST aids in this research as the Black woman’s perspective can be added to the various ecological stages EST builds upon.

When examining Black women’s lives, work experiences are essential to examine the impact of their intersection. According to Collins (2009), it is a place where SBW historically bloomed. Collins described the de-feminization of Black women due to their historic roles working outside of the home as a normality. While the traditional ideal home consisted of “real” women working in the home and “real” men working outside the home, Black women had to leave their children at home and thus compete with men at work, thereby making them less feminine if measured by traditional family values (Collins, 2009).

When framing SBW in EST, the exosystem describes an environment that does not directly involve an individual, but is thereby impacted by it. The Black mother working away from the home, possibly enacting a sense of strength she may not have desired, and her children, being forced into strength as a result of an absent parent, supports this argument of the SBW schema being built into the reality of Black women historically and from a young age.

Zora Neale Hurston (1937) described a load, in theory physical, mental and/or emotional, that is given from the white oppressor to the Black man, but is then handed to the Black woman to carry. Hurston (1937) referred to the Black woman, in this metaphorical statement, as the mule of the world. Going back to the SBW schema that has developed over time, this quote demonstrates the non-option for Black women to
uphold the community by being caretakers and prioritizing others’ needs before their own (Stanton et al., 2017). Pointing out these contexts to Black women through research may help them see where their strength comes from and how to reframe it for today’s society and economical needs.

A focus point within BFT involves the imagery associated with Black women in media. Collins (2009) discussed the stereotypes such as mammies, hot mamas, and welfare recipients that uphold the justification for Black women’s oppression. Challenging these images has been a core function of BFT. The authorities with power hold the ability to define societal values is instrumental in power plays of elite groups that manipulate images of Black women. Payton’s (2023) article asking for Black women to leave the SBW trope behind to be a soft Black girl, demonstrated the infiltration of imagery that can change the perception of Black women. Payton’s article used an image of a Black woman, sitting on the floor of a plush and simple bedroom, crossed legs, hands delicately placed on near her heart, gazing upwardly, with a calm smile. Her room color palette is very neutral with beiges and whites, while green plants decorate the interior. She appears to be content, rested, relaxed and at peace in a serene and safe environment. A stark difference to the stereotypical mammy and emasculator imagery described by Collins. Hazel Carby (1987) said stereotypes are used to disguise or mystify reality rather than represent it. Stereotypes can normalize racism, sexism and poverty to insinuate they are parts of everyday life.

Defining oneself is an argument this paper fixates on. Reimagining the taught and seen identity of SBW and moving toward soft life is a necessary lesson for Black women. As the consequences for not adopting a softer life have proven to be consequential to
one’s health according to the literature on Black women and the SBW schema. As a result, Collins (2009) focused on safe spaces that allow Black women to express themselves and their plights within a supportive environment, however, even this attempt to explore one’s identity amongst other Black women became targeted.

Claims of identity politics, separatists, essentialist and anti-democratic came of groups trying to craft independent political agendas around identity, race, gender class and/or sexuality (Collins, 2009). Others questioning their need to separate from Black men and from feminism overall, pushed against the clear need for Black women to discover within themselves how to control the images of Black womanhood. The resistance is a threat to powerful entities who desire to survey the activities within this group, to maintain power.

CRT and Black feminism connect, as they sit in between race, gender and other identities, further developing intersectionality (Rankin-Wright, et al., 2020). In being mindful of CRT within a study focused on race in gender, it facilitates provides tools as well as a foundation that fundamentally assist in challenging discriminatory racialized power processes, which marginalize individuals and groups while providing advantages to others (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Hylton, 2012, 2018).

**Influencing Factors for SBW**

**The Perception of Black Women**

The perception of Black women is detailed within Black feminist thought and thus helps frame the SBW. Black women are not a monolith and every woman who has explored and adopted soft life has arrived there for their own particular reasons. This research must lay a foundation to describe the plethora of ways that existing as a Black
woman has affected her. The argument persisted that her mental, emotional and physical health can benefit from reconsidering her adopted identity. Operating within the identity as SBW can activate stress in a Black woman. Just as life stressors can activate SBW mode to arise within a woman. Childhood “talks,” as referenced earlier in the paper, may not equip Black woman to be the only Black person and woman in a room.

Smith et al. (2019) discussed the critical strategies that Black women adopt to gain credible visibility to ascend in hostile settings where they can appear invisible. The reports from their study include stories from 59 Black women working in executive positions, used included informal interviews, revealing trends associated with being marginalized due to their gender and racial intersection (Smith et al., 2019). The term, outsider within, was used while comparing the corporate world to chess, and having to play the ‘game’ to survive. They acknowledged their race and gender as a barrier and accounted for their identities and presence being seen as a threat (Smith et al., 2019).

Many interviewers account for the extremes they would go to disassociate themselves from their stigmas and try to blend in by participating in conversations in which they cared nothing about. Other accounts include blatant statements of distrust due to the minimal conversations the Black woman wanted to participate in. Others included reports of their colleagues describing them as being aggressive and intimidating. This is of particular importance to this study as the perception of Black women being strong and/or aggressive, is often portrayed in the media as reported by multiple sources in this paper. These media influences may cause others to assume or characterize Black women this way. Of the study’s participants, 75% of described constraints they had faced in their careers, a result of the barriers due to their intersectionality as Black women. Also among
the sample of participants, 25% of the left their positions, as they did not feel their values aligned with the organization and made other choices such as new careers, retirement or entrepreneurship (Smith et al., 2019).

Black women take measures to embody someone they are not to refrain from negative perceptions. Rihanna, singer, entrepreneur and philanthropist, made a statement about bringing her whole self to work, allowing people to get to know her, after years of suppressing herself. It made her feel better, and she proclaimed, “It’s just damn who I am” (Smith et al., 2019, p. 1721). However, she did admit that this could take time or the right environment to achieve that level of comfort with oneself. The confidence Rihanna proclaimed in this quote could be an example of soft life.

As soft life does not imply easy or lazy. It can initially be very hard choices and decisions that lead to reduced stress and a peaceful life, for example a concept explored in the book, “Set Boundaries, Find Peace.” Nedra Glover Tawwab (2021) encouraged readers to, make tough decisions because they are healthy. These tough decisions have to be made regardless of how others may view them.

Davis and Jones (2021) accounted the essence of why skewed images in the media of Black women, severely damage the learning experience through inappropriate socialization of their characteristics and culture. A key argument of this paper is the cause and effect of media and content designers providing the world a set of images to thereby paint a whole group of people with, causing negative impacts throughout each layer of Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) EST for Black women. Collins (2009) explored in “Mammies, Matriarchs and Other Controlling Images.” Elite groups exercise power to manipulate ideas about Black womanhood. As a result, images of being welfare recipients and “hot
mamma’s” encourage the devaluation and oppression of Black women within the public (Collins, 2009).

Collins (2009) said challenging and controlling these images has been a major theme of Black Feminist Thought. This point of challenging images brings in the societal pressures and stress Black women face in simply existing. In their desires to be soft, there are opposite entities curating them as hard. For example, the objectification of Black women, moving them closer to nature, less human and more animalistic (Collins, 2009). hooks (1989) states that as objects, one’s reality is defined by others. Their identity created by others, and history defined in relation to the subject or the centered entity. This introduces an additional struggle for Black women striving to reimagine their identity, when one has already been created by those who control the narrative within media.

**Strong Black Women in Training**

According to Davis and Jones (2021), Black elders “train” Black women to be strong, and these teachings are reinforced by other socializing agents. American media and popular platforms such television, film, news broadcasts, and social media (in)directly characterize strength for Black women by depicting successful Black female characters as emotionally void, independent, dominant, and assertive. Again, Black women socialize one another to be strong, particularly when an individual’s strength is challenged by a situation that could bring struggle. Davis and Jones (2021) go on to describe what this phenomenon does to the community in that the reinforcing of strength in someone, is thought to be a valuable resource to help them navigate difficulties in life. These tactics minimize emotional pain, and deflect their reasons to complain about their struggles. Although these efforts appear as unyielding protection, they are preparation for
young Black girls who will one day understand how to persevere through adversity, which comes as a result of not receiving assistance from others in society (Davis & Jones, 2021). However, it can be posited that there can be a balance as to what is marketed in the media and what is socialized at home. These learned behaviors can be diversified through live models, symbolically, and through verbal cues in media (Grusec, 1992).

**Cultural Proficiency**

Many negative experiences of a marginalized group can be the result of lack of cultural awareness. Cultural proficiency includes tolerance for diversity, transformation for equity, and cultural competence (Ford, 2019). The lack of cultural proficiency allows for privilege, entitlement, and oppression (Ford, 2019). When individuals resist cultural proficiency, it can create destructiveness for diversity. As a result, the behaviors of Black women are said to change when presenting themselves in a culture that holds different values (Araujo, 2019). This can be an impacting factor for Black women’s health in that existing in life in ways that are palatable to others comes as a result of others not being willing to accept Black women culturally. As Adkins-Jackson et al. (2019) stated, in terms of ecological systems, discriminatory experiences from the macrosystem, exosystem, and chronosystem expose some Black women to stress, which in addition to the impact of socioeconomic status, can cause health issues.

Cultural proficiency can aid in designers and content creators in universally understanding people, specifically as a result of this research, Black women and provide them the knowledge to question inappropriate use of their images in media. As this is a purpose of DEI in organizations that have often failed to display nuances correctly of worldwide cultures.
Media Expectations of the Intellectual Black Woman

While the mammy and the matriarch are a reality of Black women in media throughout history, a differing imagery for other Black women emerged as well. Carey (2018) referred to a “tightrope of perfection” that Black women partake in, while embodying an intellectualistic nature. Intellectualism refers to news reporters and speakers, such as Melissa Harris-Perry, who had a successful show on MSNBC, which ended with her own resignation amongst controversy concerning remarks about an African-American adoptee within a white household. After racist backlash and death threats due to her remarks, the question of the expectation of Black women in these spaces became a topic of conversation. Seen, but not heard, visible yet silenced continues, as does the pressure to be perfect.

As this controversial situation happened in 2013, ten years later, in 2023, amongst a devastating war between Israel and Palestine, Black social media influencers began to be attacked for not speaking up quick enough for particular followers, particularly non-Black followers. Followers of these influencers quickly sent disparaging remarks with threats of unfollowing, or more, if they did not comply to their posting expectations. Instagrammer, Ibrahim (2023) attempted to educate the public on things she reflected on after being targeted for her personal stances. Ibrahim shared light saying that people should not be shamed into activism, as no one understands an individual’s personal triggers, and that sometimes silence is safer (fitmuslimah, 2023). None of these points mattered to some of the followers, and put Black social media influencers into positions of having to defend their actions. These scenarios are designed to ensure that Black people would stay in their designated, subordinate places in white-controlled public and
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private environments (Carey, 2018). This racist logic has also created and conditioned hostile situations to judge outspoken or critical Black women as thinking “too highly” of themselves for moving beyond these designated boundaries (Carey, 2018). As a result, Carey (2018) stated that Black women are thought to need monitoring and be policed in the event they breach an ideological territory.

Aesthetic Expectations of Black Women

Outward appearance and aesthetics can be a stressor for Black women. As codeswitching with language can offer a form of shelter, body features may also be manipulated for greater assimilation toward what may be deemed as acceptable. Stress and pressure within Black women flows throughout all ecological systems, but work is a place where marginalization is highly reported (Vassar & Barnett, 2020). The CROWN Act, which is an acronym for the Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair, has been enacted to protect Black women while wearing natural hairstyles in the workplace. Hair, being a cultural fixture within the Black community, can also be thought of as radical and political (Karl et al., 2022). The aggression surrounding it impacts Black women in particular, leading them to possibly escape the stress and move toward the soft life.

Goodman (2021) informed that workplace grooming policies can disproportionately discriminate against people of color. This is based on the nature and texture of their hair. Hair that tends to have distinct qualities in comparison to their white counterparts. The CROWN Act serves to protect people of color in the workplace against discrimination that would require them to change and conform to social norms or expectations of hairstyles thought to be “professional.” The CROWN Act was proposed
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by Rep. Cedric Richmond of Louisiana on December 5, 2019. Since then, many states in the United States have adopted this law, or similar ones to it (Goodman, 2021).

Felt Trust

Felt trust is the perception that one is trusted by others (Skiba & Wildman, 2018). Being trusted by others is a luxury and a bi-product of perceived competence from others. Felt trust increases productivity and possibilities of advancement for an employee due to a manager taking a risk on their skills (Skiba & Wildman, 2018). Some Black individuals construct a style of speech to dispel stereotypes and display competence in environments in which they are the minority. Strength becomes a survival strategy. Some Black women exercise “internal mental fortitude” by muting themselves when they are attacked with racist and sexist indignities (Davis & Jones, 2021). As mentioned, cultural proficiency is essential in beginning to fight the battle of ignorance and lies about the Black culture, in this case, specifically Black women, so that they can be seen and treated equally, and furthermore be trusted.

Coping Mechanisms Used by Black Women

Coping mechanisms can be used by Black women to combat and deter stress, due to their intersection. As a result of these stressors, there are several methods Black women take to survive and be successful. One concept is ambiguity, which masks the true personality of the Black woman in hopes to find relatedness and to be thought of as competent (Silverman, 2020). This ambiguity, or floating between cultural identifiers through blending in, helps Black women to survive.

Code-switching is an identity-shifting tool used to mask, alter, or soften an individual’s authentic racial and/or ethnic identity to accommodate the culture of a
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particular environment (Apugo, 2019). Research found that African American women at predominantly white institutions’ (PWIs) code-switching abilities, can lead to hypervigilance, which is the anticipation of a negative race-related encounters or action and isolation (Apugo, 2019).

Racial and gender discrimination affects Black women in the workplace. To cope with workplace discrimination, Black women often choose to focus on the aspects of their lives that they are able to control. This can include dress, speech patterns, and remaining optimistic about their circumstances. These acts minimize the impact on self (Spates et al., 2020). Code-switching also aids in relatedness, however can cause hypervigilance within self, due to the negative anticipation of remaining true to themselves as Black women (Spates et al., 2020).

Identity shifting is described as the conscious or unconscious process of altering how one speaks, also known as code switching, and acts to mitigate the negative outcomes of experiencing discrimination. However, research has also found that when confronted with discrimination, Black women may engage in reactive coping by remaining silent to avoid confrontation (Jones, Womack et al., 2021). Identity shifting, and ambiguity are ways for Black women to appear competent and trusted through disguising, hiding, or avoiding culturally identifying aspects of their personality to assimilate and simulate accepted competence within the work environment.

In a study involving Black women’s coping mechanisms for stress by Graham et al., (2022), participants reported moderate stress, when complying to SBW ideals. They reported a reliance on a variety of culture-specific forms of coping in response to stress involving their immediate community. Findings from this study illustrated the cultural
nuances of stress and coping mechanisms of those owning the SBW schema (Graham et al., 2022). The research reiterated a similar definition, stating SBW is grounded in historical experiences of hardship, and demonstrated in a collective legacy of survival, despite immense structural and systemic oppression (Graham et al., 2022). The image of SBW continues to be an enduring characteristic of modern Black womanhood. However, the research further proclaimed that possessing psychological strength does not insulate Black women from the experience of stress (Graham et al., 2022).

Dickens & Chavez (2018) reported from a study that a millennial, Black woman manager, and the time she was mistaken for a customer service representative. In response to this experience, she engaged in identity shifting and remained silent to not confirm the stereotype of being an “aggressive Black woman.” This experience of gendered racism happening at a younger age may contribute to using particular coping strategies that may help in the short term, but may have lasting effects on mental health (Jones, Womack, et al., 2021).

Research shows that Black women face barriers to promotion, stereotypes of incompetence, isolation, lack of mentorship, and labor wage disparities. These barriers lead to Black women controlling what they can through ambiguity and code-switching. This coping mechanism also aids in well-being by creating optimism, minimizing the impact on self (Spates et al., 2020). Much of this is done to distance themselves from the angry and aggressive Black woman stereotype.

Black women’s challenges are unique, as result, coping mechanisms may be implored to sustain duties at work. Thus, the strategic ambiguity described is a tool some minoritized people use to resist intersectional, Black and female, oppression. This
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particularly happens when surrounded by people who ignore the oppression or explain it away (Silverman, 2020).

Black women in racially non-diverse workspaces may come across the accusatory perception of being angry and difficult. Many Black women feel pressured in their behavior and speech to represent Black people as a race overall (Pollak & Niemann, 1998). A Dickens & Chavez (2018) study investigated Black women and their feelings about identity shifting. Some women felt they had to, others’ shifting was part of who they were, and others identified as “acting white” due to their background and upbringing, resulting in no shift in personality and speech.

Black women may develop strategies to mitigate experiencing gendered racial discrimination through remaining silent, confronting their perpetrator, or code-switching (Jones, Womack et al., 2021). These tactics all coincide with remaining strong and resilient, in the face of great trials, as admitting the discomfort or quitting could be judged as a weakness.

With these immense pressures, stresses and tensions from simply existing, a way to escape stress is imperative for Black women. Bringing attention to healthy coping mechanisms, including the skills, tools, and benefits of soft life could be a new outlet for those under duress.

Mental health is topic that is of concern due the well-being of Black women that can become compromised when they are subjected to marginalized situations. Coping through silence, identity shifting, code-switching, and choosing ambiguous personalities are examples of efforts to fit in. These can compromise one’s mental health (Apugo, 2019). The combination of race and gender-based oppression may create unique
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experiences for women of color, particularly Black women. Moreover, recent studies have explored how Black women who are tokenized experience stress and feel pressured to modify their behaviors and appearance. This can also lead to decreased psychological well-being.

Black women who adhere to the code of self-reliance for coping may be less likely to turn to others for support in stressful situations. This theme emerged in a study on depression among Caribbean women. “Dealing with it” was defined as personal and autonomous proactivity, problem-solving, and mastery over life events and ongoing difficulties (Black & Peacock, 2011). Additionally, Black women are often seen as strong, often managing other’s needs first, while being the caretakers, with strength and tenacity, within the community (Stanton et al., 2017). Additionally, Black women have relied on spiritual catharsis as sustenance, a type of self-care in the form of self-defense. It is proactive and unrelenting in the safeguarding of their identity in the face of situations that pose a threat (Hills, 2019).

**Soft Life Elements**

**Soft-Life Through Self-Care**

With these common stress realities for Black women, seeking a new way to persevere, has become an immediate need. Soft life is a new term that is developing its own meaning, and is monolithic and diverse at the same time. Just as Black women have many similarities, they also have a variety of life experiences. Soft life is an overall lifestyle choice concept, but the actions within developing or maintaining a soft life may look different for each individual. As research has pointed to a trend of similar struggles for Black women in professional workplace settings, there are also similar consequences.
In an article entitled, “When Black Women Go from Office Pet to Office Threat” Erika Stallings, author, refers to Kecia M. Thomas’ research on 35 Black career women from different fields, reporting the same difficulties. Upon being hired, their position and statuses were minimized, however eventually, with persistence, their bold contributions became problematic. In the research, Black women in the “pet” role describe feelings of tokenism, invisibility, pressure to assimilate, mistreatment, and being overprotected by colleagues. However, when resisting these feelings, and exerting influence on the job, they become threats (Stallings, 2020).

As a result of this cycle, some Black women prematurely leave positions to find other employment. The article suggest that Black women implore mentors and development outside of the workplace, to combat the difficulties of this phenomena (Stallings, 2020). This would be one example of a movement toward soft life. This demonstrates that difficulties cannot always be removed, but how one responds can be mindful and intentional.

Now that this term has a name, Williams (2022) addressed it as it has picked up steam among Black women since 2022. Soft life tends to include advice on lifestyle hacks and achieving femininity, and are essentially acts of self-care. Some of these examples are presented on social media platforms. One soft life life-styler claims she has invested in slowing down and detaching her self-worth or productivity from high levels of stress and struggle, which mirrors the closing statement in Stalling’s (2020) article:

“Because of my status as a Black woman, I realize that I will always encounter challenges in my career. In those moments I remind myself that my employer can
only control what happens within the four walls of our office and my value isn’t
determined by what happens between 9-to-5.” (Stallings, 2020, paragraph 26)

Soft life can be portrayed by luxury, and true enjoyment of an individual.
However, it can be misleading, according to Williams (2022), because working and
making money is a necessity not highlighted. Having to work is a reality for most Black
women, and the research presents that certain professional environments have proven to
be toxic for Black women. However, with development of this research, specific tools
and tactics for responding to unpleasurable environments can be accessible for Black
women. The Washington Informer Editorial Staff (2023) also addressed this newer
phenomenon, due to the explosion of the hashtag “soft life.” Stating that this generation is
now introducing the idea of a soft life, where one intentionally avoids stress and
embraces ease. It is acknowledged that this is easier said than done due to life
responsibilities. However, once again, references the Strong Black Woman ideology and
the need for women to consider embracing aspects of the soft life lifestyle.

According to the article, these can include meditating, taking a long bath,
vacation, solo dates, or quitting an unhappy job to pursue one’s dreams. As this research
homes in on one of the possible stimuli, difficult work environments, as a proponent for
choosing the soft life, understanding how SBW teachings influenced Black women’s
choice in careers, how SBW identities helped them tolerate undesirable work
environments, and how soft life provided another option in surviving and then thriving
after painful workplace experiences. Thus, the life of a Black women at work, drives the
need for another way of living be introduced to Black women. As an act of prevention and protection, identity shifting Black women to soft life can be lifesaving.

**Nigerian Soft Life Influence and Culture**

With over a million views on YouTube, the 2023 Nigerian film “Soft Life” is a fan favorite with a few thousand comments and 22,000 likes. The film follows the fairytale (eventual) of a young mother and her daughter moving into the home of a successful man to take care of his cooking and housework. In typical romantic comedy fashion, the successful rich man, falls in love with his maid, as well as her funny daughter. This of course does not come easy, as there was a female antagonist aiming to be the wife of the most successful man in town by any means, including sabotaging the reputation of his maid. The soft life of luxury is what the antagonist dreamed of. The bachelor’s home was lavish, his money plentiful, and his professional status was high. Securing a place in his life would allow her to be free from worry, and full of enjoyment – all noted goals of soft life. These goals are similar to the desires of those seeking a real softer life, even if they pursue it without the help of a convenient marriage.

This movie, and its title, are a result of the emerging phenomenon of soft life due to Nigerian influencers. Oni (2022) explained that in the Nigerian pidgin dialect, “soft” has been used as a word to describe enjoyment. The gradual progression of the term to social media, through online influencers, created a movement particularly used by Black women (Williams, 2022).

**Solutions Through Research**

Using qualitative phenomenological research, I interviewed Black women about their experiences in shifting to soft life, as a result of their early childhood teachings and
exposure to SBW schemas. The findings can offer insight into why women adopt SBW and point to properly balance aspects of it, without causing harm to themselves.

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

To make the world a more inclusive place, all fields, disciplines and practices should consider the point of view and life experiences of Black women. The way Black women have been socialized to maintain professional and personal acceptance in society, through the SBW schema, can create an expectation that is unhealthy.

I conclude in this research that awareness of Black women’s dynamic identities will inform learning design and media content in a positive way. Representation of softer images of Black women in media can impact the ecological systems that once bred SBW. With this information, the findings can equip others to identify with their soft life, as opposed to only choosing a SBW approach in life and broaden generational teachings.

There are many situations in which Black women are impacted by their intersection of race and gender. Chapter two, the literature review, demonstrates various situations, environments, and interactions that have challenged Black women to lean into their strength and resilience as will be explored through the research interviews in chapter three.
Chapter Three presents the methodology for this research on identity development of Black women exposed to and adopting soft life. The process of Institutional Review Board approval, participant recruitment, data collection, and data analysis are described.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Identity development (i.e., reimagining, transforming) is defined as a process of understanding one’s sense of self, while interacting with others (Hill, 2009). In looking at the ecological systems of Black women, their early life influences, their community, and cultural implications in society, research shows that Black women have been trained to include strength as a primary building block of their identity. Abrams, Hill et al. (2019) described the Strong Black Woman schema as being an amalgamation of beliefs and cultural expectations of constant resilience, independence, and strength that formulate decision making, thinking, and behavioral responses related to being a Black woman. The consequences of adopting these teachings leads to a mastery of portraying strength while concealing trauma. This balancing act has often been held in high esteem and as a standard trait of Black women (Abrams, Hill et al., 2019). This results in professional, social and personal challenges. However, some Black women have recently shifted their identity around strength and resilience, and toward a softer approach, as they interact with soft life media. As a result, this research prompted the following questions:

1. How do Black women describe the Strong Black Woman (SBW)? In what places, if any, have they learned about the SBW? How have they integrated the SBW schema into their identities?
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2. How do Black women define soft life? How have they constructed a soft life for themselves?

3. What significant soft life experiences, both positive effect and negative, influence Black women to construct or reconstruct ideas about their lived realities? How do Black women’s experiences with soft life, assist Black women in developing and changing their identities as SBW?

With these questions guiding the research, an understanding of Black women’s identity, the integration of the SBW schema, and the introduction of the soft life phenomenon and their lived experience with it, may offer insight into healing repercussions of SBW, as well as critical awareness of Black women’s identity development. This understanding, in turn, can be used to assist learning design and media content professionals to better design media and instruction in a way that is less harmful, more helpful and supportive for Black women. These efforts can also assist with filling a gap in the literature.

Research Method and Design

For this qualitative, phenomenological research, the transcendental framework provided a basis for how the investigation was carried out. Following Moustakas’ (1994) guidance, based on concepts from Hussurl’s transcendental phenomenology, data for this study was examined for themes, meanings and the essence of the human experience. These themes conveyed an understanding of the phenomenon (i.e., soft life) both in terms of what was experienced and how it was experienced by Black women.

The phenomenological research design, aiming to reveal the essence of the meanings of human experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2017), was an appropriate design for
BLACK WOMEN’S IDENTITY PROGRESSION

this study as it aligned with the study’s goal to examine Black women’s interpretation of their lived experiences with soft life. Additionally, it demonstrated how their experience transformed, if at all, their SBW schema, and ultimately their identity. Furthermore, the Moustakas (1994) transcendental phenomenological approach was appropriate because it emphasizes the epoche, or the systematic setting aside of biases, via bracketing personal experiences, and acknowledges personal beliefs and ideas that could have been potentially deleterious in its effects.

This research focuses on identity development and transformation in Black women within the Ecological Systems Theory constructs, particularly the mesosystem and exosystem, as described by Bronfenbrenner (1979). EST is used to illuminate the systems that influence development. As a result, a qualitative approach was chosen over a quantitative approach in order to hear the narrative examples of what happened throughout various stages of development.

Soft life being a new lifestyle concept, building a foundation of what it actually is, through definitions and human experience, appeared to be a better way to involve participants initially. An experimental design was not preferred due to soft life not being a specific prescription of activities. Asking participants to apply what a researcher deemed as soft life, may be inaccurate and biased. Other forms of research, such as a case study, may be optimal for future research when elongated adoption of soft life has been documented and is more prevalent throughout the community chosen for the research.

Participants

The convenient and purposeful sample included Black women who self-identified as adopting the soft life. For this study, soft life is defined as choosing to live a life that
mitigates struggle and stress (Bowser, 2023), adopting femininity, and using the practice of lifestyle hacks and self-care (Williams, 2022). The adoption of thoughts [cognitive], behaviors, and feelings focused on an individual’s personal care, enjoyment, pleasure, and peace is paramount. Moreover, the rejection of thoughts [cognitive], behaviors, and feelings focused on hustle culture. (i.e., the glorification of productivity, working hard, and working long hours at the expense of an individual’s mental and physical health) are minimized.

For this study, the 15 study participants were recruited as a convenience sample, drawn from personal social networks and online interest groups that consisted of Black women. These included a Historically Black College and University Alumni interest group, a Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. interest group, a Black Women in Luxury interest group, and a Norfolk State University interest group. Some members of these groups, spread the message to Black women whom they thought would be interested in taking part of the study. I additionally sent flyers to Black women on social media who had reposted content relating to soft life or demonstrated it in their social media feeds.

Recruitment letters were sent to prospective participants, giving an overview of the study, expectations, time commitment and additional pertinent info (see Appendix A). Upon agreeing to participate, each participant completed a survey to collect demographic information. Fifteen women completed the survey and met the following inclusion criteria: 1) Identified and phenotypically present as a Black woman, 2) Personally identified at some point throughout life with SBW, 3) Has been exposed to soft life in media, and 4) Consciously chose soft life lifestyle characteristics.
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The survey instrument for the demographic questionnaire is provided in Appendix J. They were not limited to regional location, as communication was done through video conferencing. All participants self-identified as Black cisgender women. The majority of the participants, 80%, \((n = 15)\) were between the age of 36–45 and 80% of the participants were full time employees, with 60%, having advanced careers. All participants agreed that they are perceived Black or of African descent. About half (53%) of the participants were single, while 27% were married and 20% were divorced. Most (67%) of the participants had no children, while 34% had one or more children. Nearly all (87%) acknowledged that they encouraged another Black woman to be an SBW and 80% identified as an SBW all the time. Similarly, 86% of the participants had direct experience with soft life, through viewing it on media. Further, 86% also agreed that soft life has had an impact on their lives by changing their daily practices, and 80% claimed that it has impacted the way they view themselves as SBW. The participants said they saw soft life in media, primarily through Instagram or other forms of social media. Their ideas of soft life included setting boundaries, living on their own terms, peace, letting go of control, and lavish living.

Of the 15 participants who completed the survey, 100% volunteered to participate in the focus group interview. Of those participants, 12 completed individual interviews, and 10 submitted letters to young Black women. The Black women chose their own pseudo names for anonymity during the research activities. Appendix I presents the demographics for the 15 participants who began the study.
Setting

The eligible and selected participants were invited, via email, to a focus group interview on the Zoom video conferencing platform. They were told to keep their cameras turned off and to change their screen names to their chosen pseudo name. Individual interviews were also conducted on Zoom; however, the participants cameras were turned on.

Data Collection

To begin data collection, the research was approved by the Institutional Review Board. Advertisements were posted, and informational letters were sent to interested parties. Those potential participants who were interested, and fitting of the research requirements, communicated their desire for participation. After agreeing, they received and signed a letter of consent to participate in the study. Next, the participants completed the demographic survey. Following completion of the survey, the participants attended the focus group interview. In the focus group interview, the study details and the expectations from the informational letter were reviewed. To help the participants actively participate, an email was sent prior to attending, which asked the participants to prepare a statement on what soft life meant to them.

As part of the focus group interview activities, the participants described what soft life meant to them, listened to a song entitled, “Hardlife” by Summer Walker (Appendix K), engaged in a short discussion about the lyrics, and examples of soft life in media were presented as visual examples. The focus group interview lasted one hour. At
the end of the focus group interview, individual interviews were scheduled and held within three days.

The individual interviews, also facilitated through Zoom video conferencing, began with a welcome. The prescribed questions were then asked while the questions and conversation were recorded. The individual interviews ranged from 45 minutes to one hour.

The focus group interview and individual interviews, were recorded locally to my laptop and transcribed by Otter.ai transcription service. The Otter.ai transcripts highlighted keywords from the interviews, and I also extracted key themes and repeated words from after reading the transcripts thoroughly to analyze the essences.

As an instruction given during both interviews, each participant was asked to write a letter to a young early career Black woman, approximate age 22-25, describing how to achieve success, how to overcome obstacles, and how to take care of their well-being through soft life. It was also requested to include a personal story on a life defining obstacle and a soft life moment that impacted their identity. They were asked to submit the letter to me via email within seven days following their individual interviews. The letters were also analyzed, and those themes and keywords were added to the focus group interview and individual interview data.

A sampling of participants was invited to comment on the final representation of findings as a form of member checking. Participants were sent via email, a document with themes and descriptions that emerged. They were asked to read the document and provide comments on it. They were asked to email the document back within three days.
of receiving it. All research activities beginning with consent through participant comments occurred within a 14-day time frame.

Data triangulation, the corroboration of data sources, was used to increase trustworthiness and ensure a rich understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). Communication between myself and the participants, during the data analysis process, continued for clarification on comments beyond the scope of the interviews.

Appendix D outlines how each data source was used to answer the research questions.

**Data Analysis**

The survey, focus group interview, individual interviews, researcher’s notes, and letters were analyzed using the Moustakas’ (1994) modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method, and a universal description was created uniting all experiences that represent the group. I also looked for essences and universal themes, particularly to the development of the SBW schema and identity, as well as soft life activities that influenced identity progression and related behaviors.

Once the data were collected, the analysis of the interview transcripts, researcher’s notes, and letters began. I started by reading and rereading all data sources. When analyzing the focus group interview, I highlighted each phrase or word that were significant to the SBW schema and the phenomenon of soft life.

Each highlighted statement or word was collated into a spread sheet. Repetitive statements and words were grouped. I made a list of nonrepetitive, non-overlapping statements (i.e., invariant horizons or meaning units of the experience). The group interview list was initially clustered and synthesized, which led to an initial list of
fourteen SBW themes and fifteen soft life themes. After relistening and rereading individual interviews, participant statements and comments that matched a theme, were inserted into the spreadsheet. These themes and statements were then grouped and synthesized into smaller number of themes due to their likeness through the essence of what the participant was trying to convey. This reduced list is notated in Table 1. More specifically, from these themes, I developed textural descriptions of what participants experience as they developed their SBW schema and its transformation via with soft life experience. This was followed by structural descriptions of the contexts and conditions of their experiences of soft life (Moustakas, 1994). Finally, I used these descriptions to construct a description of the essence of the phenomenon of study (Moustakas, 1994); that is, soft life experiences resulted in development, namely transforming or reimagining of schema and identity. Afterward, a summary of the entire study will be provided, as well as comparison to findings from other literatures in the literature review (Moustakas, 1994).

**Biases/ Subjectivities**

This research began as an investigation on how Black women survive and thrive after trauma in the workplace. As a result of my own personal traumas in the workplace, likely being rooted in racial prejudice and sexism, I began to see the world differently. My passions changed, my drive decreased, my motivation shifted, my self-esteem and self-worth suffered. It took years to heal and recover from the psychological and emotional harm. Although I knew about racism and had been prepared through my early childhood talks. However, when your livelihood depends on you saying the right thing,
looking the right way, and performing perfectly, the impact of my intersection being Black and female was illuminated.

It is often said in the faith community that “everything happens for a reason.” The mental and emotional battering that happened to me while trying to make a career for myself, definitely had a reason. This dissertation demonstrates proof, as a result of reading peer reviewed research sources and countless accounts of other stories just like mine. I had an opportunity to write about what happened to me, but I shifted my perspective to what happened for me. Racism and sexism are not exactly expiring any time soon, and the energy spent defending that is exhausting. As a result, looking the other way toward reprieve, and redirection of my energy resulted in research on soft life.

**Researcher Bias**

My bias stems from hearing my story within other Black women’s testimony. I know that my experiences are not singular, and that they are quite common. There is research in many forms that prove it. However, this research takes a different angle, hoping Black women will one day be able to let down their guard and excuse themselves from the Strong Black Woman schema. One example would be going to work and doing the job they were hired to do. Not feeling guilty for not overachieving, being imperfect, or just being normal. Because I want Black women to recognize this, I could have a perspective that leans towards soft life being a positive answer to a difficult problem. I could assume that all Black women would feel the same way, however if I make that assumption, I would be just as problematic as oppressors marginalizing us. However, Moustakas (1994) interjects Descartes’ note about intuition, stating intuition is a place of sourcing knowledge of the human experience, and that it is natural attitude. My personal
intuition led to know that I had been mistreated as a Black woman, and that strength to see the situations through were my only option. Being soft, was not an option.

However, Black women are all different, with strands of cultural similarities. However, my experience is not every Black woman’s experience. Not every Black woman wants or needs a soft life. There are quite a few that have always had one. As a result, I vowed to ask neutral questions to find out how the participants felt and hoped that they can be a great representation of how the greater population feels. My research findings are the answer as to why I was motivated to focus my doctoral career on my personal hardships. Regardless, if the following findings aligned with my own personal experiences, there was purpose to the research in that the participants stories, as Black women, were heard.
Chapter 4 presents the results for this qualitative study. After briefly recapping the data collection and data analysis process, the chapter begins with the participant demographics. Next, the chapter introduces the emerging themes based on the textural and structural descriptions by research question. The chapter concludes with a summary that highlights the overarching outcomes based on the data results.

**CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS**

To briefly recap, the data collection consisted of a survey, a focus group interview, individual interviews, and a letter written by each participant. In addition to these sources, the research’s notes and memos were used for data analysis. The group interview lasted one hour and the individual interviews lasted between 45 minutes to one hour each. Notes, such as reminders about specific participant’s characteristics and questions from the focus group interview, were documented. The initial words and phrases were organized within a list. These were synthesized and reduced into more refined textural themes, followed by structural themes. The initial 29 themes were reduced to nine major themes, with sub-themes, to answer the research questions. Finally, I used these themes to construct a description of the essence of the study phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

Consistent with Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (EST), the participants described interactions between themselves and their social environment as reciprocal, influencing their development (e.g., schema, identity) as Black women (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). In early years, the home and family environments (i.e., microsystem), affected the women’s understanding of the definition and what it meant to be a SBW. These influences were overt and covert, being directly communicated by (e.g.,
“the talk”) and witnessed within the home, extended family, and community (e.g.,
aunties, family friends, grandmothers).

The participants learned that being a SBW meant demonstrating independence,
strength and caretaking. These were traits they internalized and became part of their
identities. They overwhelmingly described themselves as “resilient” women who can “get
things done.” Consistent with literature, the SBW socialization and integration of the
SBW schema into their identities had a positive impact (Jones, Harris & Reynolds, 2021)
protecting them from oppression. However, the unrealistic and unachievable standards
also induced trauma and stress, similar to what is documented in the literature (Abrams,
Hill et al., 2019). Therefore, when exposed to soft life, all the participants described
being drawn to it and illuminating an alternative SBW schema.

**Participant Demographics**

The participant demographics are as follows. 80%, \( n =15 \) were between the age
of 36–45 and were also full-time employees. Among the Black women, 60% had
advanced careers. All participants agreed that they are perceived Black women or women
of African descent. About half (53%) of the participants were single, while 27% were
married, and 20% reported being divorced. Majority (67%) of the participants had no
children, while 34% had one child or more. Nearly all (87%) acknowledged that they
encouraged another Black woman to be an SBW and 80% identified as an SBW all the
time. Similarly, 86% of the participants had direct experience with soft life, through
viewing it on media. Further, 86% also agreed that soft life had an impact on their lives
by changing their daily practices, and 80% claimed that it has impacted the way they
view themselves as SBW.
Research Findings

In alignment with each research question, the significant themes generated from the analysis of data sources are organized and presented through (a) textural descriptions: “What” participants define as soft life and what they experienced as they were exposed to and practiced soft life; (b) structural descriptions: “How” participants experienced soft life in a manner that transformed SBW schema and identities; and finally, (c) a composite description of the “essence” of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). However, the discussion begins with the development and definitions that the Black women schema and identities had prior to soft life. This discussion is important as it demonstrates the schema and identity transformation and the juxtaposition of schema and identity of a traditional SBW, compared to after their soft life experiences.

Table 1 demonstrates the textural and structural descriptions within the research questions and Table 2 demonstrates the traditional SBW schema and identity versus the transformation after the soft life experience.
Table 1

*Research Questions, Themes, Textural and Structural Descriptions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Research Question (1),** How do Black women describe the Strong Black Woman (SBW)? In what places, if any, have they learned about the SBW? How have they integrated the SBW schema into their identities? | • Be Independent  
• Be Strong  
• Be a Caretaker | Textural: “What” participants traditionally describe as a SBW. The participants described SBW and their identities as SBW captured in three primary themes. |
| **Research Question (2),** How do Black women define soft life? How have they constructed a soft life for themselves? | • Healing  
• Being Authentic  
• Thriving (Joy, Peace)  
• Experiencing Personal, Relational, and Professional Adversity | Textural: “What” participants define as soft life and what they experienced as they were exposed to and practiced soft life |
**Table 1 (Continued)**

**Research Question (3)b**
How do Black women’s experiences with soft life, assist Black women in developing and changing their identities as SBW?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>• Redefined Scripts</th>
<th>Structural: “How”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[relational cognitive disequilibrium; gaining confidence in saying no, in order to prioritize self]</td>
<td>participants experienced soft life in a manner that transformed SBW schema and identities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Changed Behavior</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 2

SBW Schemas and Soft Life Transformations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional Strong Black Woman</th>
<th>Strong Black Woman after Soft Life</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Independence</strong> “Persistent”</td>
<td><strong>Interdependence</strong> Embrace disequilibrium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Resilient”</td>
<td>and behavioral change by recognizing the need for others and help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strength</strong> Not Showing Weakness, Struggle</td>
<td><strong>Authenticity</strong> Thrive by seeking joy, peace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Caretaker</strong> Taking on Everything, Getting Things Done</td>
<td><strong>Care for Self</strong> (Embrace disequilibrium and behavioral change by recognizing worth)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Deserving the best, saying no and setting boundaries</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Textural: “What” participants traditionally describe as a SBW.

Research Question (1) asked, “How do Black women describe the Strong Black Woman (SBW)? In what places, if any, have they learned about the SBW? How have they integrated the SBW schema into their identities?” Three major themes emerged across participants’ interview responses and letters. Participants described their schema of the SBW inclusive of independence, strength, and caretaking. During individual interviews, all of the participants described how their ecological systems, namely their microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) informed their schema and identities as SBW, early in their lives. During her individual interview, LuvBug, explained what it meant to
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be a SBW, and how it was directly communicated by her dad (e.g., “the talk”). LuvBug described that her exposure was more overt, themes of independence, strength, and caretaking were salient to the SBW identity, as consistent with the literature of (Stanton, Jerald, Ward, & Avery, 2017).

**Be Independent.**

The Black women in this study provided numerous examples of how independence was instilled in them. SBW was a salient identity dimension, within overt verbal messages from caretakers and parents, that they all noted. Abrams, Hill et al., (2019) describes SBW schema as a combination of beliefs and cultural expectations inclusive of unyielding resilience and independence. This parallels Jones et al., (2021), describing the SBW characterization as independent, caretakers, and emotionally restrained as to not appear weak. The weaving of these lessons surrounded Black girls as they grew into women, which became apparent within the interviews.

For example, in LuvBug’s individual interview, she stated that she learned to be independent through her father’s tutelage. Saying, “My dad always taught me, you know, don't rely on anybody else. That you have to know things for yourself and do things for yourself.”

The women also witnessed their aunties, family friends, and grandmothers model what it meant to be a SBW. For example, Christina described,

I would say my, my biggest example, was my mom. So, I think that's who I learned it from. And then subsequently, you know, I had aunties, real aunties/play aunties that I grew up with, and they, they seem to exemplify it, but then also state
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it, and maybe they didn't use the phrase each time, but there was some something that alluded to it.

Christine, in her letter, discussed the fact that being strong was part of being a Black woman; however, this was not always something positive. Specifically, she shared, “Within our community, hustle culture and being a “strong Black” (and might I add “independent”) “woman” are idealized to a fault.”

She also described consequences being independent, resulting in stress, frustration, and making errors at work as a result of taking on too much. However, this idea of independence as a pillar of the SBW identity was unraveled as the Black women in this study were exposed to and began practicing soft life. Zuri, described the trait of independence with the requirement of innate strength saying, “Because we're independent, that can be seen as like, we don't need help, or we're not going to ask for help, we'll just do it because we're strong Black women…”

Be Strong.

These Black women have prioritized being strong as a method of survival. Similar to being independent, every participant in the study learned that a SBW is to also be strong. Odell was taught by her family members that, “A Black woman can go through so much, but yet still remain strong. Not only herself, her family, her job, just strong in the community.” She described that being strong meant, “Just pushing through, like just overcome any obstacles and still come out on top.” Reid concurred in her interview, describing that being a strong Black woman meant, “Being able to just kind of, persevere, make it through whatever challenge is put in front of them…Someone that does all of it with poise.”
For others, strength was demonstrated by hiding discomfort or distress. LuvBug, acknowledged this saying, “I never show that to them, that I have weak moments. So, I have my weak moments by myself so that people don't see me as I’m not being the strong person that they think I am.” TJ added to the narrative by sharing what she was told, “Don't cry be strong, because people are going to take advantage of you if they see that you are soft.”

Others, such as Christina, explained that being strong meant not only hiding discomfort, but all emotions, i.e., saying, “Something that's been bred in me, not that I’m not an emotional person, but maybe to not show weakness as much as maybe the next woman could.” Christina identified this idea as “self-suppression.”

“Not showing weakness” and “enduring pain” were phrases commonly used throughout the interviews and letters to define being strong. The women also identified denying femininity and embracing a harder persona was necessary as a SBW. This characteristic of strength, that all the participants noted as salient to their SBW schema and identity, was taught to them by their family and close friends as a protective measure. And, as Davis et al. (2021) described, the women understood that their mothers, grandmothers, aunties, and friends saw “being strong” as valuable resource to help them navigate difficulties of a Black woman’s life. In her individual interview, Mahogany explained, “I feel like it was just an ongoing storyline as it from a child and I heard it. Growing up in my household, I heard it growing up at church and at school. So, it was like, a common thread throughout my entire life.”

These strategies, meant to mitigate experiencing gendered racial discrimination included; remaining silent, confronting their perpetrator, or code-switching. The research
also added that just “dealing with it” as a method to circumvent discrimination and
difficult life events (Black & Peacock, 2011). Each participant employed managed their
need to be strong and employed different strategies.

Strength capacity can show up in various ways and within Gordon’s (2023) article
“Unique Issues Facing Black Women Dealing with Abuse,” an unfortunate reality of
domestic violence is discussed. She says that some advocates believe that Black women
believe they need to be strong, and that asking for help would be a sign of weakness
(Gordon, 2023). Additionally, looking from the outside in, even health providers tend to
carry preconceived biases of Black women’s strength. According to, Bent-Goodley,
Zonicle and Romero-Chandler (2023) some providers may view Black women as strong,
resilient, and able endure difficult conditions. And as a result, they are not prioritized for
services (T. B. Bent-Goodley, 2013; Hall et al., 2021; Waller et al., 2022). Considering
Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) EST, and the macrosystem, which is a manifestation of
overarching patterns of ideology and organization of the social institutions common to a
particular culture or subculture, strength is not only taught, it is expected by others in
society who operate in positions that affect Black women.

Be a Caretaker.

Being a caretaker also emerged as a consistent theme throughout all the data
sources. “Meeting everyone’s expectations” as Christine said, and “denying ourselves
what we need” is the very epitome of the SBW. LuvBug stated that as a SBW, the
priority is not herself.

According to Wallace-Sanders (2008) the depiction of Black women in
Hollywood overwhelmingly embodies the matriarchal or caretaking figure, showing her
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care for others with or without care for herself. Consistent with Collins’ (2009) the
research, the women in this study ascribed to the reoccurring “matriarch figure” they
often saw in movies and modeled by mothers and grandmothers in the home.
Furthermore, in defining SBW, Mahogany emphasized in reference to the SBW role,
“Sometimes she does it [others responsibilities], you know, at the expense of her goals,
and her dreams, and her happiness.” This goes along with the stereotyping and
dehumanization of Black women, as even Christina comments, “…but I feel that people
may think that Black women can or will take a lot of stuff.” Reid mentioned that there is
a trend where there is an expectation that Black women are supposed to come rescue
everything. In her experience she is able to reflect on a common trend stating, “Let's
bring the sister in to like whip everyone into shape and she'll, she'll be able to figure it
out. We don't have to give her instructions, we don't have to, like, explain stuff or you
know, pave away or do anything for her, she can make it work.” She recognized and
stated, “In entertainment or media, some of the ways that women were depicted in
movies or tv shows kind of solidified like that idea of like, what it means to be a strong
Black woman.” As it pertains to the lack of femininity and humanity allowed, Reid also
said, “No matter what happens, we're supposed to smile and just, again, be strong, like
not, not have any emotion.” Coupling this devastating reality, Rubywoo says, “You go
over and beyond, you take on a lot. So, you don't have time to even think about the fact
that, you know, I'm drowning, and I need help.”

All of the participants noted that what they learned about SBW and how they
integrated this schema in their identities, stood in stark contrast to the SBW they became
after exposure to and adoption of soft life.
Textural: “What” participants define as soft life.

Research Question (2) asked, “How do Black women define soft life? How have they constructed a soft life for themselves?” Therefore, here I describe the results related to how the Black women in this study defined and practiced soft life, as well as what they experienced as soft life subscribers. For this study, the participants defined soft life, consistent with the literature, by choosing to live a life that mitigates struggle and stress (Bowser, 2023), adopting femininity, and using the practice of lifestyle hacks and self-care (Williams, 2022). The adoption of thoughts [cognitive], behaviors, and feelings focused on an individual’s personal care, enjoyment, pleasure, and peace is paramount. Moreover, the rejection of thoughts [cognitive], behaviors, and feelings focused on hustle culture. (i.e., the glorification of productivity, working hard, and working long hours at the expense of an individual’s mental and physical health) are minimized. Overwhelmingly, the participants adopted multiple aspects of soft life, as it related to their personal needs.

The Black women used various words and ideas to describe soft life as they were exposed to it via social media, friends, and acquaintances. Some mentioned the desire to be more feminine, as consistent pressure to demonstrate SBW traits, led them to desire more femininity in soft life. A common idea among all participants was that soft life meant liberation from the oppressive grip of others. This includes cultural expectations, namely the restrictive SBW schema and “hustle culture,” (Hersey, 2023). Within this, human beings are viewed as machines to serve those in power and not provided with the dignity to rest (Hersey, 2023). Zuri explained in her interview, “Soft life to me means that you're basically liberated. You're doing what you want to do, and how you want to do it.
Regardless of what people are going to say. You do not care. You are not subscribing to hustle and grind culture. You are actively and purposefully engaging in rest.”

Their practice of soft life varied. Some of the women described soft life as involving “luxury”, while others interpreted it as living more simply, “free from stress,” and “less burdened.” The Black women participants said yes to enjoyment and luxury and said no to commitments, people, and places that did not serve them kindly. They practiced soft life by going to therapy, taking walks, going on vacation, and healthy eating. Mahogany explained, “I’ll just say, putting on my lingerie and walking around my house. Dancing very sensually for myself, and like, not being shameful about moving my body and those very soft, sensual ways.” Reid joyfully described in her interview that her soft life was inclusive of a new pastime, golf. In reference to making time for golf, Reid said, “This is the thing for me to get out and enjoy some quiet time quiet space. And it's a thing that I'm doing for me, and it's not for anyone else. I don't care what it looks like for anyone else, or to anyone else. But this is, this is my thing.” While participant Sue scheduled regular massages as a part of her self-care Soft Life regimen. Zuri has cut back on her calendar, began practicing more self-care, started saying “no” more often, and overall, just doing what she wants to do.

The observation of social media hashtags and the remembering of examples from women in their personal lives, began to activate the realization that they could be practicing soft life too. For example, Zuri learned about soft life on social media, while some participants watched friends model soft life practices. They then, in turn, adopted (e.g., wearing perfume, getting their nails done), while others saw and adopted soft life practices seen on social media such as Instagram. Zuri stated, “I definitely saw soft life
on social media, … like floating in a pool with a cocktail. …I made soft life era, like things like that. But then just following the hashtags and just realizing like, oh, this is actually like becoming a movement.”

Participants explained that as they were exposed to and began constructing a personal soft life, they experienced healing, authenticity, and thriving. However, some participants also experienced significant adversity personally, professionally, and relationally as they disrupted personal, familial, and societal norms related to what it meant to be a SBW.

**Healing.**

Healing required transformation and the Black women each recognized steps that needed to be taken within themselves to acknowledge and work on their part. Operating differently or even opposite to what they had been taught to be as SBW became paramount. Mermaid mentioned the historical importance of church as a place of release for Black women, as she stated it has been a safe space of emotional release. Historically healing for Black women has been associated with faith. Relying on faith, prayer, and the pursuit of balance were primary factors in Spates’ et al., (2019) research study on coping strategies of Black women. Their findings presented that prayer and spirituality helped participants remain optimistic in the face of adversity. Faith became a useful tool in helping 41% of the participants in their study circumvent issues outside of their control (Spates et al., 2019). This was also true for the Black women in this study, implementing faith, spirituality and praise with their healing, was enhanced with the soft life phenomenon. For LuvBug, she emphasized what that looks like today with her spiritual growth, with her way of practicing soft life. “I know that God has a purpose. And he's,
everything happens for a reason. And so, I continuously try to grow spiritually. So that's how I'm practicing soft life.” Odell also used faith the see herself through a family trauma saying, “I was able to still persevere through that. I was still able to, you know, lean on my faith. Even though it was hurtful, I was still able to function.”

In addition to faith, Odell noted that she focused on her mental health and therapy, which was important for her healing. She recognized and stated, “What was meant to break me did not.” “I had shut myself out…I just wanted to keep pushing through. I kept pushing, you know, trying to be positive, having positive affirmations you know, things of that sort.”

Zuri is leaving her job as a conscious act in her journey toward healing. She shares her transitional experience within her letter to a young Black woman. Her cautionary tale informs the young woman of the consequences of not implementing aspect of soft life intentionally and the “pushing through” that resulted in exhaustion and burnout. She emphasized the need to put yourself first and referenced the adage, “you can’t pour from an empty cup,” as a way to communicate self-care. Zuri also acknowledged that healing takes work, and for her, this is done by allowing herself to rest, in which she calls, “an act of liberation.”

**Thriving.**

Peace is a state that many of the women strived for when choosing soft life in their journey to healing. Odell vocalized a defining factor in making peace with herself through personal acceptance. In reference to a personal challenge she overcame, she stated “As I look back on it, I needed to extend myself some grace. I think I did not do that at first. But you know, I extended myself grace, to say it's okay to not be okay. It's
okay to back away from everything and get yourself through this situation.” TJ said, “For me, I became open to receiving assistance or care or help in a way where I would normally not allow myself because I would be like, I got it, I got it. But opening myself up to allow others to care for me, helped me in spaces where I would normally be okay with just doing it myself. But also taking a step back to allow myself a breather and allow someone else to actually assist me in different areas.”

Thriving, as defined by the participants, moved away from the basic standard of living and allowed abundance. If surviving is just keeping one’s head above water; thriving is relaxing in a pool on a floatie, while drinking a fruity cocktail. The Black women in this study found ways to have more in life than basic survival. Sue said this type of living is not extra, it should be incorporated. Some participants described thriving as peace, while others described it as happiness. Rubywoo said, “So for me soft life is more about prioritizing, it’s my peace. It’s my safe space, it is where I feel like I need to reward myself.” Marlene said, “I can make decisions, engage in activities. I can live in a way that makes me happy because I said so.” Odell thrives in her vulnerability saying, “Allowing myself the space to be vulnerable. I’m removing myself from anything that doesn’t aid in me being positive towards myself. Realizing that I can’t pour from an empty cup, right?”

The messages of thriving came through powerfully in the letters to young Black women. Messages about freedom, creativity, space, softness, femininity, travel, breaks, tranquility, self-care, self-improvement, risk taking, exploration, rest, change, and growth infiltrated the pleas to the young Black women. The participants encouraged young Black women to do life differently, more softly from what they were taught. As Reid advised,
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“The soft life isn't about weakness; it's about allowing ourselves the freedom to enjoy life's simple pleasures. It's a recognition that our strength doesn't mean we must bear the world's burdens alone; it means we can also bask in the warmth of happiness, love, and peace.” TJ urged the young Black woman to “Allow yourself the space and the autonomy to be free within your creativity, and spirituality.” Zuri said, “We always can face obstacles, and we'll always be able to figure them out. But sometimes we don't want to do that, like we don't always want to have to struggle. We don't want always want to or have to figure things out and overcome adversity. That is very tiring and exhausting. We just want to be.”

Being Authentic.

Being authentic in a society that has not accepted certain aspects of Black womanhood, was explained by participants. Zaire reflected in her interview “…being authentic to who I am. Having natural hair, I wear Afrocentric clothes.” In fact, Black hair and outward appearance research addresses authenticity and the challenges Black women face. The Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair Act (CROWN) prevents employees from being socialized to societal norms and expectations, from assumptions against a Black woman’s appearance, that are thought to be “professional” (Goodman, 2021).

However, authenticity goes deeper than the physical. In the letters to young Black women in the study, the Black women greatly emphasized the need for the young Black women to focus on their authentic selves in their letters. Mimi wrote, “Standing in your femininity, as this is not a sign of weakness, but a testament to your authenticity.” Mahogany penned, “You will encounter societal pressures that attempt to define what a
woman's strength and femininity should look like. I want you to recognize that there is no specific mold.” Christine encouraged, “Embracing the soft life can look anyway that you desire it to. Do what feels authentic to you.” Zuri said, “You can be strong, reserved, and still show up as your authentic self.” Zuri also proudly expressed that she could show up as her authentic self, without any regret, as a testament to her own personal growth.

The Black women also discouraged code-shifting and identity-shifting, which are used to mask, alter, or soften an individual’s authentic racial and/or ethnic identity in an effort to accommodate the culture or environment (Apugo, 2019). The Black women adamantly wrote to dissuade and discourage those patterns. Mimi encouraged this through her letter by saying, “Be yourself, use your authentic voice. Normalize your culture. Do not try to accommodate others, for fear of what they may think of you.”

Experiencing Adversity.

There was a struggle in choosing soft life, as struggle has been an accepted reality for generations. An upward battle is expected, and sometimes others may not be comfortable with a Black woman “just being,” as Zuri stated. The balance of positive and negative weigh heavily on the adoption of the soft life lifestyle/identity. Mimi wrote in her letter to a young Black woman, “I have only recently begun to use my voice to say “I need help”. To some that may seem weak, but for me I gained so much power.” She acknowledged that others may not agree with the way she makes choices and uses her voice, but it still benefited her. She followed up by encouraging them to never let anyone alter their minds about prioritizing themselves. Further demonstrating that there will be outside pressures that can have influence in choosing a soft life.
In the letters to the young Black women, these themes continued as motivational lines laced within the penned notes. TJ stressed, “Don’t dim your light for anyone!” Acknowledging that standing out can bring attention, possibly negative attention to the young Black women, but also wrote, “Your light is never too bright for those who are meant to be guided by your light and warmed by your spirit.”

LuvBug informed the young Black women in her letter, that they may be seen as combative as a result of being taught to be strong and speak up for themselves. This supports Rubywoo’s message as she wrote, “The best part for me is having mastered the act of saying “NO” when you are overwhelmed, and do not subscribe to people pleasing.” As people pleasing can be done to appear opposite of what LuvBug described how others see Black women. In her words, LuvBug acknowledged that others may see Black women as, “combative, hard to work with, rude, mean and or disrespectful.” People pleasing, as a mechanism, can be a result of what the research defines as identity shifting (Apugo, 2019) in order for Black women to not be seen the adjectives LuvBug stated. Grappling with other’s opinions can cause disequilibrium in making changes that benefit Black women’s quest for a soft life difficult. However, overwhelmingly the Black women in their letters, encouraged the young Black women to proceed courageously.

Structural: “How” participants experienced soft life and the transformation of their SBW identities.

Research Question (3) asked, “What significant soft life experiences, both positive effect and negative, influence Black women to construct or reconstruct ideas about their lived realities? How do Black women’s experiences with soft life, assist Black women in developing and changing their identities as SBW?”
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As demonstrated through the structural description of the settings and contexts influencing “how” participants experienced the phenomenon of soft life that transformed their SBW identity and schema (Moustakas, 1994), a web of contextual factors emerged in the participants’ descriptions of their experiences. These included cognitive factors or the refinement of schema (i.e., motivations, disequilibrium) and behavioral changes.

Redefined Scripts.

As the Black women in this study were exposed to and interacted with soft life, they began redefining personal and relational scripts. The pillars of the SBW, learned in childhood, began to unravel. The soft life media they encountered and in turn adopted caused disequilibrium or dissonance in the schema and identities they held for SBW. In early childhood, participants, including Zuri, described understanding of the SBW as being independent. Yet, through the exposure to soft life, this idea was challenged. Zuri felt that strong Black women “…still do desire help, we still like for people to help us if people to offer help. Because like, we just can't, we can't do it alone.” In her letter to a young Black woman, she similarly noted that interdependence, “receiving help and resting,” were essential if she or any Black woman was to be strong.

TJ in her individual interview identified that her ultra independence, as a trauma response, was highlighted as she interacted with soft life media. In her letter to a young Black woman, she explained that being interdependent was not a sign of weakness but an act of Black women’s empowerment. “Stand up and use your voice, it gives you power.”

The Black women in this study also described throughout the individual, focus group interviews, and letters, that soft life illuminated their lack of self-prioritization, which ultimately took a toll on their mental and emotional well-being. Through their
exposure and participating in soft life, they learned that overworking and prioritizing family, friends or other’s needs ahead of their own wellness was a weakness. It left them to feel burnt out, disconnected, disembodied, and unfulfilled. As they watched women via social media and in real life practice soft life, they began to question their conceptualization of the SBW schema and identity.

Their exposure to soft life via media illuminated a different way to live, inclusive of taking care of themselves and enjoying pleasures, such as shopping and therapy. Marlene noted that shopping once seemed indulgent but in watching a friend, she recognized that it could be a form or relaxation or therapy, which Black women deserve, “She gets something new, shopping is like her therapy.” Odell noted that a family friend, who practiced soft life, “rebelled” against the hustle culture and the idea that her body should be used for service to others. Rather, Odell, in her individual interview reflected that her friend took care of her body and valued self-care and pleasure, “She always was the woman who…kept her hair done. She kept her nails done. She always kept perfume on. …she always kept herself up.” Sue, during the group interview stated that a SBW must rewire her internal programming that says taking care of yourself is extra, “I need to pamper, not even just pamper, because it's almost seems like, that's something that's extra. It's just like, no, this should be incorporated.” This an active shift in a SBW’s schema.

Many of the women recognized that their strength as Black women was not in independence but interdependence. Reid wrote, “It's a recognition that our strength doesn't mean we must bear the world's burdens alone.” Moreover, embracing assistance allows the Black women to step into the femininity that several of the participants
desired. Zaire discussed the juxtaposition in her individual interview, questioning dual identities by saying, “So how can I be feminine? How can I be lady like to still be like this boss babe to right still be the strong Black woman.”

Exposure and adoption of soft life also transformed these women’s understanding of strength, especially when embracing their authentic feminine and masculine selves. These women traditionally associated their strength as Black women as being independent and strong, caretakers. However, as the participants encouraged young Black women to adopt soft life, many like Mimi urged them to recognize that embracing the continuum of femininity and masculinity was strength, “…stand in your femininity, as this is not a sign of weakness.”

**Changed Behavior.**

Exposure to and practice of soft life resulted in the women making changes in their lives, including acting different in relationships, making career changes, and adopting and letting go of specific practices. Zuri decided to quit her job in order to better her life. Moving toward soft life principles and away from stress and burn out, may in turn, better her life. She stated, “I just don't want to I don't want to work hard. Like they had to work hard. I don't want to, like, always be in sort of that survival mode, I want to be thriving. And, and I do want to be a strong black woman thriving, but then I also want to have that that softness, that femininity, like I like, I definitely want to have that soft life.” The conditions she once had to subscribe to on the job, involved a toxic environment where she could not show emotion. Her decision to leave will mitigate a deterring factor in her quest for a soft life.
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Bee noted that as a SBW, needed to persevere in her job and embrace the struggle. However, with the exposure to soft life, she realized that there were different options and struggle was not something to be endured. One could find a different job. She reflected, “People my age never thought of quitting a job because it was hard. We didn't imagine changing jobs so easily. It's like endure, endure, endure, and you better. Don't walk out until you have something else, even if to your detriment.” Enduring is the only option. But with the adoption of soft life, not only in jobs, but in all areas of life, participants noted that they began making behavioral changes, even if it involved risking relationships and security.

Marlene noted however, that choosing to act in alignment with the principles of soft life did not mean choosing the easy or positive, as she reflected on the decision to pursue higher education that later resulted in providing her with financial resources and freedom. She said,

“I just believe every, every circumstance that you live through everything that you go through, be it positive or negative, adds another layer to who you are, you know, we are just, you know, multi layered people. And so I believe in the aggregate, it's a positive result that, whatever it is, helps to make us who we are at any given moment.” Marlene further explained, “Moving forward with education. My great grandparents were not educated. They couldn't be, you know, because of when they grew up. But they always instilled in me that education is key baby! Education, the more education you get, the better off you're going to be. And I really took that to heart, so I have a PhD, because they told me. I see that having this degree exposes me to so many different networks, and different people, in different circumstances, that I know that I would not have had
without it. So, education to me also is representative of the soft life.” Mimi, in her letter to a young Black woman, encouraged SBW to change their behaviors in a manner that is consistent and authentic for them, rather than being directed by societal norms. She penned, “You do not have to conform to the norm. You do what’s best for you and nothing else should matter.”

Zaire chose to attend therapy sessions, just as she would schedule an appointment for a physical ailment. She emphasized, “If I feel a cramp or if I'm feeling pain, I will call my PCP like nobody's business, or the dentist or the eye doctor. But when I'm sad, anxious, depressed, or don't want to get out of bed crying all day, I never think to call a therapist, or I never thought to call a therapist.” Constructing a new normal or reality has allowed her to expand her identity as a client.

For Zuri, thriving Resorts to traveling on a regular basis saying, “traveling, like once a quarter has definitely like, contributed to my soft life journey. I mean, it was a point of me, like really saying, okay, I am going to like dedicate this time to really be intentional about just unplugging.”

Essence of the Phenomenon.

While participants identified challenges in adopting soft life and consequentially transforming their SBW schema and identity, their feelings and emotions about their soft life experiences and the consequential changes were consonant. After embracing soft life in a manner that transformed their identity, cognitions, and behaviors, participants voiced experiencing a tremendous sense of freedom.

For some, there was the joy and peace as they chose themselves, rested, and adopted luxuries such as getting regular massages, therapy, and wearing sexy clothes. For
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a subset of participants, there were challenges such as reflecting on self and recognizing what thriving looks like for them. TJ shared, “I've been in survival mode this whole time, not realizing the difference between thriving and surviving. And for me personally, that was a realization that I had to come to when it comes to like having a softer life, which falls in line with not necessarily needing a partner, but just allowing myself to say, hey, if someone offers help, I can accept it.”

For all the participants, no matter their varying demographics, shared one common experience. They agreed that the soft life was transformative in nature. Participant Marlene shared in reference to a self-first approach. “Making choices, and not necessarily being dictated so strongly by other forces outside of myself.”

Though the specific soft life experiences and forms of adoption differed, participants cited experiencing disequilibrium and encountering new ideas that resulted in motivation to make changes in their behaviors. The changes made enabled them to thrive and live more fully, but this also came with some professional, personal, and relational challenges (e.g., uncomfortable feelings, challenged relationships). Ultimately, these Black women shed the traditional SBW identity, giving them an opportunity that not many Black women have, (Abrams, Hill et al., 2019) transforming their schema and personal identities to better thrive and live more authentically.

Exposure to soft life media, an exosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), helped the participants expand and transform their SBW schema and, ultimately, their identity development. Many of the participants described this process as “healing,” as they began to experience self-fulfillment. They began to live more authentically and in alignment with who they felt like they really are. They began embracing a continuum of both their
femininity and masculinity, as well as softness and strength. Thus, they felt not only more authentic, but integrated. Consequentially, they thrived, experiencing more joy, peace, rest, and less struggle. However, not all consequences were positive.

Through exposure and practice of soft life, the Black women experienced cognitive and relational disequilibrium. The soft life narrative disrupted their traditionally held schema about a SBW (e.g., feminine) and how a SBW should relate to others (e.g., choose self, interdependent). Therefore, they needed to begin to redefine their SBW scripts or schema and consequently “free themselves” behaviorally (e.g., practicing, caring for self, resting, going to therapy, asking for help saying no, choosing enjoyable and luxurious activities, going on vacation). They began setting boundaries and caring for themselves first.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Chapter five summarizes the themes, textural and structural descriptions of the phenomenon, limitations, strategies for media creators and Black women, and opportunities for future research. The section concludes with a recap of the research findings as it pertains to Black women.

Discussion

The findings of this study were inclusive of (a) textural descriptions describing “What” participants define as soft life and what they experienced as they were exposed to and practiced soft life and (b) structural descriptions explaining “How” participants experienced soft life in a manner that transformed SBW schema and identities. Findings also included a discussion about how the Black women participants developed and defined the Strong Black woman schema and identities they had, prior to soft life. Their
definitions of soft life were also presented. Nine themes emerged to answer the three research questions, and findings were consistent with Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological Systems Theory and Collins’ Black Feminist Thought (2009). More specifically, the findings extended the research in applying Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological Systems Theory to a phenomenon in which little empirical research exists.

According to Bronfenbrenner (1977), human development is influenced by the early family environment in the home (microsystem), indirect mass media impacts (exosystem), and influences from the culture (macrosystem). Consistent with the literature, Black women recognized where their teachings of SBW began, the home, (microsystem) and specifically identified how they applied them to their life. Some Black women participants also mentioned the impact media had on dictating the characteristics of Black women, i.e., television media (exosystem), which is supported by the literature. For example, researchers found through the consumption of movies, there was greater association with endorsing the strong Black woman ideal, while music video consumption was associated with a greater endorsement of traditional gender attitudes; attitudes that revealed a diminished sexual agency among Black women in subsequent analyses (Ward, Jerald, Avery & Cole, 2019). The Black women in the study also recognized the cultural impact (macrosystem) of accepting these notions, (e.g., Black women independence, strength, and resilience) and thereby shifted their voices for the betterment of the culture in their letters to young Black women. Through those letters, they gave sound advice on how to be independent, strong and resilient, but to not forgo putting their needs first, a theme within soft life.
The BFT (Collins, 2009) literature was consistent, and extended, due to the Black women moving past their early life teachings and choosing to implement soft life. Three BFT themes including, Black women’s oppression, the mammy figure, matriarchs, controlling images, and the self-defining power of Black womanhood applied to this research. Through the research, it was found that the Black women learned how to navigate oppression through their SBW teachings, reject misrepresented and skewed images by seeking peace, healing and thriving, and re-defined Black womanhood by being unapologetic and authentic about their desires in life.

Answering research question one, the Black women began by noting that early in their childhoods, understood that SBW meant demonstrating independence, strength and caretaking. They all agreed that their characteristics were internalized, and salient parts of their identities, prior to soft life. The SBW socialization and identity had both positive impact (Jones, Harris & Reynolds, 2021) as well as a negative one (Abrams, Hill et al., 2019). Consistent with the literature, the participants described that the SBW identity and associated characteristics of independence, strength, and caretaking, all helped protect them from societal challenges that Black women face (Jones, Harris & Reynolds, 2021), yet was also a source of poor wellbeing (Abrams, Hill et al., 2019). Additionally, the literature supports the indoctrination of independence, strength and caretaking through BFT as Collins (2009) reports that Black women often worked outside the home, left their children at home, competed with men at work, diminished as not a “real woman” as outside of the home workers, all while diminishing their femininity.

All of the participants described how their ecological systems, primarily their Microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), informed this schema and their identities. The
idea that a SBW is independent, strong, and a caretaker came from direct communication (e.g., “the talk”) and modeling within the home, extended family, and community. However, when exposed to soft life, all the participants began adopting an alternative SBW schema. Exposure to soft life media, an exosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), resulted in the illumination and transformation of the participants’ SBW schema and, ultimately, their identity.

The second research question, how the women defined soft life, was answered by the women in their group and individual interviews, as well as when described the lifestyle to the young Black women in the letters. Their ideas and definitions of soft life came through their exosystem, observing in media. Additionally, they also reflected on select women that they observed growing up and realized that those women possessed qualities of soft life, prior to it being a phenomenon. From online sources they witnessed lavish living, relaxation, and self-care activities. The Black women participants also reflected on a select few women they witnessed while growing up, doing nice things for themselves such as getting their nails done, wearing perfume, and shopping for nice things. In essence, for soft life they witnessed women doing nice things for themselves, whereas with SBW, the participants observed, Black women being “independent” and handling difficult tasks on their own. A trait they would later embody.

This is consistent with the literature as research also speaks to Black women declaring the need for self-focused activities as quoted by Lorde (1988 p. 130), “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation and that is an act of political warfare.” It goes on to extend the literature as this paper supports the idea that soft life is
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not an introductory lesson in life that Black women have traditionally learned, but a response to a hard life of a strong Black woman. The title of this manuscript “What it Takes to Live This Lifestyle,” explains that Black women must first be strong before deserving a break. As it is a double entendre, the title can also insinuate that within this paper, there will be a list of instructions on how to live a soft life. However, it is a reminder that Black women have been expected to endure pain first, before being privy to pleasure. The Black women participants, in their letters to young Black women, coached against this, and ordered them to prioritize themselves through the activities that have now come to be defined as soft life.

As participants were exposed to and began constructing a personal soft life, they experienced healing, authenticity, and thriving. As stated, many of the participants described their transformation processes as healing, as they began to experience self-fulfillment. Through this, they began to live more authentically and in alignment with their inner most selves. The authenticity came through shedding the SBW expectations and identities (Abrams, Hill et al., 2019), such as constant resilience, independence, and unwavering strength. Through this, the Black women began to thrive in terms of implementing desired activities, additional life luxuries, vacation travel and extended rest. For example, Christina said, “When I was around a more successful women, they would kind of talk about you know, trips they would take or spa days they would have and certain like pampering sort of things that made it seem like, you know, self-care.” However, some participants also experienced significant adversity personally, professionally, and relationally as they disrupted personal, familial, and societal norms related to what it means to be a SBW.
Research question three, involved the positive as well as the negative aspects of adopting soft life. The research questioning allowed the women to reflect and then answer on how choosing a new identity came with the aforementioned victories as well as challenges. Redefining scripts such as de-feminization, mammie stereotypes, caretaking to a fault Collins (2009), and “saying no” caused disequilibrium, but helped the women move forward with a new identity. The Black women recounted breaking points, traumas, and exhaustion, which propelled them to softness. The Black women had to confront internal scripts and known stereotypes about what others assumed about Black women, (combative, rude, mean) in order to be comfortable in their new schema as soft life ladies. Consequently, they behaviorally (e.g., caring for self, resting, going to therapy) made changes too. This included setting boundaries and speaking up for themselves. The literature describes this as challenge for Black women in particular, as they have disassociated from themselves or assimilated to prevent being seen as aggressive or intimidating (Smith et al., 2019).

Overall, the theories EST and BFT supported the literature on Black women’s experiences as SBW in early life development, as well as their womanhood. This research extends the SBW literature through additional accounts of intersectional, race and gender-based experiences as Black women, managing the negative impacts of marginalization. This research, addressing the new phenomenon of soft life, also extends the literature, as the concept of physical, mental and emotional reprieve for Black women already existed, but not in the form of a named social media influence, shifting culture.

Limitations
This research provides insight into a phenomenon that has not been readily studied, leaving the opportunity to explore the vastness of what soft life has come to be. However, the research is not without limitations. Research bias was a possibility, as I understood and have lived the implications of SBW, and I may have favored the adoption of soft life, thereby interpreting the results with bias. However, this was circumvented by telling my personal account of the phenomenon (Moustakas. 1994).

As soft life is a recent phenomenon of rebranded mental and physical wellbeing (Williams, 2022), peer reviewed sources on the topic were not readily available. Direct research on the topic was sourced from online magazines and blogs. Additionally, as soft life has emerged within the last few years since 2022, individuals who are aware of it and its implications, could be more apt to fully understand what it is, and report on their positive adoptions of it. This could have caused the data to be biased, not representing a full range of Black women.

**Recommendations**

The findings illuminated the intersection of race and gender and how the microsystem, exosystem and macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) surround and influence Black women. Soft life can be a way in which Black women find equilibrium between SBW teachings, and the necessary lessons ingrained within them (i.e., the talk) and a healthy response to societal and cultural pressures and expectations. Furthermore, it is recommended that soft life not be a response, and that it should be adopted as part of a Black woman’s lifestyle. In fact, the Black women in this study made recommendations based on what they learned. They expressed that young Black women should consider soft life strategies as part of who they are, not as a reaction to life stressors. Primary
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themes included; Authenticity, Boundaries, Choosing You, Enjoyment/Thriving, Femininity, Peace, Putting Self First, Resting, Saying No, Self-Care, Being Unapologetic. (See Appendix M)

**Strategies for Media Creators.**

Many Black women learned about soft life through social media. As a result, writers, influencers and content creators can be advised by the strategies imparted by the Black women in this study. The findings can shape the SBW messaging taught within the Black community, as well as the tendency for Black women to be portrayed negatively in the media. Carby (1987) said stereotypes are used to disguise or mystify reality rather than represent it, a sentiment of hers from the late 1980’s, is still present in current times as well. Carby (1987) offered a view of reconstructing Black womanhood, during those times as did others throughout history. This was expressed in her book entitled, Reconstructing Black Womanhood, The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist. Although Carby and others expressed the need for Black woman’s transformation through literature, there is currently an opportunity to introduce different messaging through media platforms and outlets. The findings support the literature stating that skewed images of Black women in media, severely damage learning experiences through inappropriate socialization of Black women’s characteristics and culture (Davis & Jones, 2021). These characteristics include being emotionally void, independent, dominant, and assertive. The Black women in the study noted that soft life images and ideas were positive to Black Women. Taking note of this, media creators may consider expanding a broader range of characteristics for Black women that can have an impact culturally, as represented in Table 3.
Table 3

*Suggestions for Media Creators on Implementing Soft Life Images in Media*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Current Trends</th>
<th>Suggested Imagery</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strength by any means</td>
<td>Situational vulnerability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black resilience</td>
<td>Sources of pain for Black women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victory over defeat</td>
<td>Feelings of failure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do it yourself</td>
<td>Receiving help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be the mentor</td>
<td>Be the mentee</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although these suggestions can appear unsettling to an independent Black woman, and sound contrary to what Black women have been taught, they are the anthesis to moving toward a softer life and lessening the unrealistic expectations of a full time SBW. This coincides with the disequilibrium and encountering new ideas that resulted in motivation to make changes in their behaviors, from SBW to soft life. Carey (2018) discusses the” tightrope of perfection” stating that [Black women] stand in stark contrast to people from other dominant groups, in which they accelerate into positions of power, with protected imperfections. Black women are not perfect all the time, and cannot be perfect all of the time. Attempts at this, stated in the research and by participants, has not turned out mentally or physically well for Black women. Adoption of the phenomena is essential and awareness is highly needed.

**Future Research**

There are opportunities for future research in studying other marginalized populations around the world, who historically share the same characteristics as Black women. As this research was heavily influenced by Black women the United States of America, replicating this study in other countries with similarities to the racial and gender
disparities of United States history could offer similar or different findings. For example, a society that practiced legal discrimination against Black people, where whites and non-Blacks received better treatment.

Other possibilities include studying a subset within the studied demographic of Black women. This can include limiting age groups or generations, specific financial status, specific education, married women, married women with children, and single mothers. The findings could reveal different SBW as well as recommendations, based on their life experiences.

Future research could include quantitative analysis of soft life, with additional surveys given to Black women on the impact or lack of impact it has had on their lives. Another study could be done on the analysis of occurrences within social media platforms. This can be done by analyzing soft life as a hashtag, the associated hashtags within a post, and how they coincide with imagery and the messaging of the blogger.

As many Black women have not heard of or adopted soft life, investigating the mental and emotional health of a particular demographic, compared to Black women who have adopted soft life, in that same demographic, could demonstrate the effects or lack of effects of a soft life implementation.

Africana Womanism presents a different separatist perspective that moves away from feminism, as feminism is centered in female whiteness. Using it as a framework could provide a different view on Black women seeking and adopting soft life. Additionally, it could also reframe the concept of SBW as its centers on building your own “table,” rather than asking for a seat at the “table.” Furthermore, Africa is central to the theory as the ancestral homeland of Black women (Bekele, 2021). This could possibly
provide more context to the use of the slang term soft, due to soft and soft life having origins in Nigeria (Oni, 2022).

**Conclusion**

Hooks (1989) stated that one’s reality can be created and defined by others in relation to those who are subject. This research demonstrated this as the Black women in this study discussed how family (e.g., microsystem), media, community (e.g., exosystem) and culture (e.g., macrosystem) shaped their identity. Black women have long been associated with being strong, however, this research illuminated a need for change. Upholding the SBW schema, as the literature states, is harmful to the health and wellbeing of Black women. These findings and recommendations surrounding soft life can come together to aid in the reformation of identity of Black women. Hooks (1989, p.42) also said that “As subjects, people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identity, and name their history.” Today and for generations to come, daughters, nieces, mentees, sisters, and girls have the opportunity to not only dream bigger, but also live softer through their own self-curated identities.
REFERENCES


BLACK WOMEN’S IDENTITY PROGRESSION

https://hermoney.com/enjoy/is-living-a-soft-life-the-secret-to-success/


BLACK WOMEN’S IDENTITY PROGRESSION


BLACK WOMEN’S IDENTITY PROGRESSION


BLACK WOMEN’S IDENTITY PROGRESSION


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BLACK WOMEN’S IDENTITY PROGRESSION


Appendix A Letter to Participants Co-Researchers

January 7, 2024

Dear potential participant __________,

Thank you for your interest in my dissertation research on soft life and the identities of Black women. I value your unique contribution and the perspective you could add to this research. I am excited about the possibility of your participation.

The purpose of this research is to investigate the progression from Strong Black Woman traits and the phenomenon “soft life” in Black women. For this research, participants will be required to attend and communicate in a group session with other women, participate in a private interview with the primary researcher, and conclude the research with a writing activity. Select participants will have the opportunity to review the completed research. The total time commitment is approximately four hours over two weeks. The group session will take place the evening of January 21st, with a tentative time of 6:00PM EST.

After reviewing and agreeing to the expectations of participation, please email or call me to confirm your participation. Please sign and return to me by January 15, 2024 to ensure your participation.

I am using a qualitative method to execute this study, which will require you to explain your personal experiences with the subject matter, Black women’s identity, racism, sexism, and soft life. Through your feedback, I hope to be able to answer the following questions:

1. How do Black women describe the Strong Black Women (SBW)?
   In what places, if any, have they been learned about the SBW?
   How have the integrated the SBW schema into their identities?
2. How do Black women define soft life? How have they constructed a soft life for themselves?
3. What significant soft life experiences, both positive effect and negative, influence Black women to construct or reconstruct ideas about their lived realities? How do Black women’s experiences with soft life, assist Black women in developing and changing their identities as SBW?

Through your participation, you will serve as a co-researcher, being asked to recall various events from your own experience with gender, race, early childhood teachings and past and current experiences, including possible trauma, and successes. In this study, you will also have the opportunity to meet other participants who will be willing to share their stories. Please be mindful of the confidentiality and trust bestowed upon you. I want to welcome you to a safe space where you can express your thoughts freely. You will have access to a list of professional counseling sources, in the event you would like to utilize a professional support system.

Upon agreeing to being part of this study, you will be provided an informed consent letter to sign and return, agreeing to being part of this study.

I value your participation and thank you for your time. I look forward to our future conversations. If you have any questions or concerns prior to signing the release, we can set up a time to discuss. My email address is monique.pollock@memphis.edu and my phone number is (704) 401-7478. Thank you in advance.

Sincerely,

Monique F. Pollock
Appendix B Research Participant Advertisement

Research Study Participants Needed

Have you ever called yourself a strong Black woman, but have recently been living the “soft life?”

If so, your participation for a study on Black women’s identity would be greatly appreciated. If you are interested in sharing your experiences, please email me by Tuesday January 16, 2024 for details. Thank You!
monique.pollock@memphis.edu
Appendix C Demographic Survey

1. What is your age?
   a. 18-24
   b. 25-34
   c. 36-45
   d. 46+

2. What is your employment status?
   a. Unemployed/School
   b. Part Time
   c. Full Time
   d. Retired

3. What best describes your level within your occupation?
   a. Entry Level
   b. Mid-Career
   c. Advanced Career

4. Racially, how do others typically identify you?
   a. Asian
   b. Black/African Descent
   c. Mixed Race
   d. Hispanic Non-Black
   e. Native American
   f. White/Caucasian

5. What is your marital status?
   a. Single
   b. Divorced
   c. Widowed
   d. Married

6. Do you have children?
   a. 0
   b. 1
   c. 2
   d. 3+

7. Have you ever encouraged another woman to be a “Strong Black Woman?”
   a. Yes
   b. No

8. Have you ever identified with being a “Strong Black Woman?”
   a. Definitely Not
   b. Situationally
   c. Yes, I am a strong Black Woman!

9. What is your experience with soft life?
   a. Not familiar with the term
   b. I have seen it on social media and/or magazines.
   c. I have made an effort to incorporate soft life into my personal routines.

10. Has your experience with soft life changed your daily practices?
    a. No
b. Somewhat  
c. A lot  

11. Has your interaction with soft life, affected how you view yourself as a Black woman?  
a. No  
b. Yes, I believe I am slowly changing the way I view myself  
c. Yes, I have changed the way I view myself  

12. Define “soft life” in your own words?  
*Type your answer*  

13. What soft life media have you interacted with?  
*Type your answer*
### Appendix D Data Source Alignment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Theory &amp; Construct</th>
<th>Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How do Black women describe the Strong Black Woman (SBW)?</td>
<td>EST (Bronfenbrenner, 1977)</td>
<td>Survey Questions 5, 8, 9 Focus Group Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Individual Development (i.e., identity)</td>
<td>Hard life Discussion: Listen to Summer Walker’s “Hardlife” Ask: How if at all do you identify with this?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Microsystem (e.g., family, faith communities, teachers, peers)</td>
<td>Individual Interview Questions 1-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Mesosystem (e.g., family-school; family-faith)</td>
<td>Letter prompt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Exosystem (e.g., social media, Black women archetypes in movies- Mammies, Matriarchs and Other Controlling Images, workplace environments)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Macrosystem (e.g., culture; oppression of BW)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Chronosystem (e.g., time; age)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BFT (Collins, 2009)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Self-Definition (e. race, class, gender, sexuality, and nationality intersection of self-definition)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Identity Development Theory (Abes et al., 2007)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Core self</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Intersecting multiple social identity dimensions (Definition (e.g., race, class, gender, sexuality)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Meaning-making (e.g., identity is constructed through external expectations and context as well as an internally generated self-understanding)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Identity is dynamic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1997)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Individual Development</td>
<td>Soft life Example: Share examples of soft life in media. Visualizing and listening to soft life in media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exosystem (e.g., soft life media)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. What significant soft life experiences, both positive effect and negative, influence Black women to construct or reconstruct ideas about their lived realities?

How do Black women’s experiences with soft life assist Black women in developing and changing their identities as SBW?

**EST (Bronfenbrenner, 1977)**
- Individual Development (i.e., identity)
- Microsystem (e.g., family, faith communities, teachers, peers; taking a look at self and other cultures to be influenced or reject identities learned)
- Exosystem (e.g., soft life media)

**BFT (Collins, 2009)**
- Self-Definition (e.g., race, class, gender, sexuality, and nationality intersection of self-definition)

**Identity Development Theory (Abes et al., 2007)**
- Core self
- Intersecting multiple social identity dimensions (Definition (e.g., race, class, gender, sexuality)
- Meaning-making (e.g., identity is constructed through external expectations and context as well as an internally generated self understanding
- Identity is dynamic

**Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1997)**
Appendix E Individual Interview Questions

1. How would you define the term SBW?
2. How did you learn about the SBW?
3. Do you or have you ever considered yourself a SBW? How would you describe yourself as a SBW?
4. What were significant experiences, if any, have informed your identity as a SBW?
5. What consequences, positive or negative, have you experienced identifying as a SBW?
6. What is your personal definition of soft life?
7. How are you currently practicing soft life?
8. What was your first exposure to soft life?
9. Describe your experience with soft life, starting with your first exposure to now.
10. What type of soft life media are you currently consuming?
11. How has soft life, if at all, affected your life (e.g., thinking, behaviors, identity as a SBW etc.)? Include positive and negative effects.
12. What are the significant soft life experiences that were salient to these changes or transformations?
Appendix F Personal Account of the Phenomenon

Researcher: Monique F. Pollock

I discovered soft life by casually browsing Instagram in late 2022. The first memories that I have were of a younger, mid age Black woman, doing leisurely things such as reading book, watering her plants, cultivating her home, relaxing, with her skin glowing from what it appeared to be intentional body care. Those two words, soft life, put me at ease for a reason that I have yet to discover. A few more posts appeared on my feed before I started to understand the emerging trend of soft life. It seemed that primarily Black women, were lavishing in all things good and positive, living their best lives. As more posts appeared, I began to hear and see the root of the phenomenon that was unfolding. Resistance to stress, struggle, pain, and unnecessary strength. Whether these issues were rooted in their careers or personal relationships, these Black women were walking away from unpleasurable people, places and things and toward a safe haven within their true selves.

Eventually, my algorithm began to show me more examples of soft life, but not always hash tagged that way. These Black women influencers indulged themselves in lavish things, exotic travel, and tantalizing experiences. These ladies were putting pleasure at the forefront of their lives. As a result of these carefully curated pages, I began to take on some of the habits of these women. I was personally not satisfied with my morning routines at the time. I also, had not totally settled in to having a home, moving from city to city yearly, caused me to live out of suitcases. I was not putting in the extra effort to treat myself to nicer things. I rushed many things. My make up routine, my showers, my breakfasts, my lunch packing, my commute, and more. Although I
showed up to work looking well put together, I began to normalize breezing through life. My life was, technically, a softer version than most. I had the audacity to leave jobs that did not serve me, I fed myself healthy foods, I worked out on a regular basis, I worked on personal emotional and spiritual healing and growth. I also traveled the earth far and wide. However, as successful as those deeds were, there were parts of me that I was not loving enough. These influencers and bloggers gave me a reminder that I needed to value my routines more and slow down. Lavish in these personal moments, because a perfect day ahead is not promised to anyone.

It is inevitable that we will run into people who are not so kind to us, for a multitude of reasons. However, being kind to ourselves first is imperative. This, to me, frames our relationships with others. I began to realize that if I gave myself subpar treatment, others would too. If I gave myself top level treatment, I would redirect mistreatment aimed at me immediately, or I would excuse myself from the situation. I would disregard minor things meant to harm me, now that I understand that it speaks volumes about the offender’s character. Clapping back, being right, being strong, being resilient, being unbreakable at any cost is not sustainable. Soft life reminded me that I can error and it would be okay. It takes a lot more than one forgotten email to fire someone. And if I were to get fired for something so insignificant, it was clearly not a good fit and not a place I should be. Soft life is the softest protection I ever heard of. It is easier on me. I feel it gives Black women permission to walk away in strength, rather than staying and crumbling. Reteaching ourselves, building a new identity, reconditioning, rewiring, transforming and remerging. That is soft life to me.
Appendix G Focus Group Meeting Agenda

Focus Group Interview Script

Participant Welcome and Informed Consent

Introductions

Please introduce yourself. Provide your name and at least one fun fact about yourself.

Discussion of research, overview of the informed consent, signing of the informed consent electronically

- Research purpose

- Participant Expectations (e.g., Individual recorded; approximately four hours of commitment (Approximate times: Participant preparation 30 minutes, focus group meetup 1 hour, Interview 1 hour, Letter 1 hour, Review of research 30 minutes))

- Discussion of counseling services available if a participant is in need

- Creation of Pseudo names. What would you like your pseudo name to be for this research?

Visualizing and Listening to Soft Life in Media

Hard life Discussion: Listen to Summer Walker’s “Hardlife” Ask: How if at all do you identify with this?

Soft life Example: Share story/definition of how you have been practicing soft life

Explanation of Next Steps

- Individual Interviews

- Letter to a Young Black Woman

- Participant Review of Research
Appendix H Writing Prompt

Post Interview Prompt: As a Black woman who has learned about being a strong Black woman, and as a woman who has embodied the soft life lifestyle, write a letter to a young woman. The young woman who you are writing to, is emerging as a professional and may not understand the possible positive and negative implications of both schemas, SBW and soft life. Feel free to use personal stories of how you have overcome obstacles and achieved success with using both identities.
Appendix I Focus Group Member Demographics and Soft Life Definitions

Focus Group Members

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudo Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Full Time</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bee</td>
<td>36-45</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Christina</td>
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<td>36-45</td>
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<tr>
<td>LuvBug</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mimi</td>
<td>36-45</td>
<td>Single</td>
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<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Odell</td>
<td>45+</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reid</td>
<td>36-45</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>No</td>
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<td>Rubywoo</td>
<td>36-45</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sue</td>
<td>36-45</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>TJ</td>
<td>36-45</td>
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<td>Zaire</td>
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<tr>
<td>Zuri</td>
<td>36-45</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Black</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Personal Definitions of Soft Life

Bee
Participating in self-care practices

Danie
We’re not trying to be dealing with stress and struggling. And with the struggle it was mentally and financially.

Christina
It’s handling business, but also taking care of yourself

LuvBug
I will say soft light is not always being in control. Not always being the person that has to make the decision.
BLACK WOMEN’S IDENTITY PROGRESSION

Mahogany  Oh, just tapping into my feminine energy, then that’s it.

Marlene  I think of living on my own terms, which doesn’t mean that there’s not work involved, that there’s not responsibilities involved. There’s not necessarily goals that I don’t have to meet. There are goals that I’ve set for myself, but they’re on my terms.”

Mermaid  Taking care of myself, mentally and physically.

Mimi  Putting me first, relaxation, peace.

Odell  So I tried to have some type of self care, some type of motivation, something to push me for that day. I’m also just taking time out the week at least once, once or twice, you know, to do something for myself, and feel good about it.

Reid  That little bit of luxury, like, Whatever, whatever luxury means to the individual. It’s like being able to take care of yourself and being able to enjoy whatever bit of luxury to have in your life and not feeling guilty for it. Taking whether it’s like taking additional time space, like, like, quietness.

Rubywoo  So for me soft life is more about prioritizing, it’s my peace. It’s my safe space, it is where I feel like I need to reward myself. It is where I feel like I need to take a step back and you know, take a deep breath. It is where I feel like I need to prioritize my mental health.

Sue  I also still need rest and recuperation. And I need to pamper, not even just pamper, because it’s almost seems like, oh, that’s something that’s extra. It’s just like, no, this should be incorporated.

TJ  For me, I became open to receiving assistance or care or help in a way where I would normally not allow myself because I would be like, I got it, I got it. But opening myself up to allow others to care for me, helped me in spaces where I would normally be okay with just doing it myself. But also taking a step back to allow myself a breather and allow someone else to actually assist me in different areas.

Zaire  I think the soft life is you can be this strong person. But it’s also being vulnerable, being fragile, being in tune to your emotions.

Zuri  Soft light to me means that you’re basically you’re liberated. You’re like doing what you want to do, what you want to do and how you want to do it. Regardless of what people are going to say you do not care.
Appendix J Demographic Survey Link

https://memphis.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_dKgbygt0DwkY9U
Appendix K Lyrics “Hardlife”

You, you, you, you, you, you
You, you, you, you, you
You, you, you, you, you
Damn boy, you
You say you a soldier, but baby,
I’m a soldier
Tired of being strong and I’m
only getting older
I did it by myself (well)
Ain’t had nobody else (else)
And if I had some help, then I
had to pay
What kind of shit is that? Just do
it, could you say?
Could you say you love me?
(Love me)
Could you say you care? (Care)
Could you say you love me?
(Love me)
And you wanna be there?
It’s the audacity
What you have asked of me
You said you want me soft
But give me a hard life
It’s the audacity
What you have asked of me
You say you want me soft
But give me a hard life
You know that ain’t right
Tired of seeing all these, all
these, all these
Vanishing these white bitches
living their soft life
With they feet kicked up and
they glass in hand
Bills is paid, thanks to the man
Know how to lead and he got a
plan
Faithful and help run the house
and with the kid
Could it be a reality? For me and
my
Be strong sister (strong, strong,
strong)
Be strong sister
You got it, you’re so strong sister
(strong, strong, strong)
You gotta be strong sister
Be strong sister (strong, strong,
strong)
You gotta be strong
Be, you’re doing so good sister
Just gonna carry on
Me and my, me and my, me and
my
Women who look like me
Me and my friends, my mama,
my sister
Elders and auntie, all of my kin
Me and my, me and my, me and
my
Me and all my black queens
Me and my, me and my, me and
my
We’re what we get, what we need
Source:
https://genius.com/Summer-
walker-hardlife-lyrics
Songwriters: Summer Walker /
Kabo Morebodi

Hardlife lyrics © Lvrn Publishing Llc,
Beatstars Publishing Worldwide
Appendix L EST Model, Black Youth Focus

(Stern, Barbarin, & Cassidy, 2021) artist, @clinpsych_ind
Appendix M Soft Life Recommendations

Soft Life Recommendations Within Letters to Young Black Women

Authenticity

- Stand in your femininity
- There is no specific mold for strength and femininity
- Be strong, reserved, and still show up as your authentic self
- Soft life can look anyway that you desire it to
- Do what feels authentic to you
- Show up as your authentic self without any regret

Boundaries

- Discern when strength is required
- It is necessary to set boundaries, for self and others

Choosing You

- Choosing you is not a weakness
- You have permission to live how you choose to live
- You do not have to place yourself in a box

Enjoyment/Thriving

- Allow yourself the space and the autonomy to be free within your creativity, and spirituality
- Embracing both your strength and softness as a woman is a source of empowerment

Femininity

- Embrace your feminine qualities
- The balance between independence and embracing your femininity is your unique super power

Peace

- You don’t always have to be the loudest in the room as a matter of fact your silence will often speak louder than your words

Putting Yourself First

- Put yourself first and take time away from your business to focus on self-care
BLACK WOMEN’S IDENTITY PROGRESSION

Receiving Help/Resting

- Take time to rest
- Don’t bear the world's burdens alone
- Be open to receive help and don’t be afraid to ask
- You can be strong and still need rest
- You can be strong, independent, and still ask for the help you need

Saying No

- It is fine to say “no” and life will go on

Self-Care/Therapy

- Prioritize your self-care, mental health and life breaks.
- Remember that your mental health is important
- Do not be afraid to learn and unlearn things needed to help you adapt to change

Be Unapologetic

- Stand tall, step up, and show out unapologetically black and independent
- Do not be afraid to take risks and explore new opportunities
- There is a space out there where you can be free and truly shine
APPENDIX O IRB Approval

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Title: Soft Life and Identity for Black Women
Creation Date: 12-8-2023
End Date:
Status: Approved
Principal Investigator: Monique Pollock
Review Board: University of Memphis
Sponsor:

Study History

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Key Study Contacts

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