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The Effects of Interpersonal and Noninterpersonal Loss on Music Preference

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Abstract

Through a series of studies, Lee, Andrade, and Palmer (2013) predicted and found that sadness caused by an interpersonal loss creates greater preference for listening to mood-congruent music than sadness caused by a noninterpersonal loss. However, in their experimental procedures, they inadvertently confounded the intensity of the sadness induced in the noninterpersonal and interpersonal sadness conditions, such that the interpersonal sadness condition created stronger feelings of sadness. The current study sought to replicate Lee et al.'s (2013) findings with the modification of unconfounding the intensity of sadness in the interpersonal and noninterpersonal conditions. After controlling for intensity, this study found no significant difference between the interpersonal and noninterpersonal sadness conditions in their preference for mood-congruent music. However, in support of Lee et al. (2013) findings, this study did find that the interpersonal sadness group was more likely to choose sad songs than the neutral group. This result was not found for the noninterpersonal sadness group. In effect, this could indicate an overall preference for mood-congruent music when sadness is caused by an interpersonal loss.

Keywords: sad, interpersonal, noninterpersonal, mood-congruent, emotion, music

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Introduction

Music can create different mood states for listeners ranging from euphoria to extreme sadness (Västfjäll, 2001; Hunter & Schellenberg, 2010). Some research has looked at the motivation behind engaging in positive media, or media that expresses feelings of happiness, but there is still a lack of consensus as to why people choose aversive media. As a step toward elucidating this phenomenon, this paper seeks to contribute to the literature on why people choose to listen to sad music. This motivation to listen to sad music seemingly goes against mood management theory (Knobloch & Zillmann, 2002), which is based on the hedonic principle, that people are motivated to engage in behaviors that uplift their mood (Wegener & Petty, 1994). According to this view, one would choose to listen to joyful or expressively happy music to improve one's mood. However, some researchers attempt to explain choice of sad music as consistent with the hedonic principle by theorizing that only particular people listen to sad music, those who have the personality disposition that leads them to enjoy pain or sadness (Huron, 2011). However, other researchers disagree, and believe that a person's current mood state may cause this choice to listen to sad music, as such music can help get them in deeper touch with the feelings they are experiencing or with related memories (Bower, 1981; Martin & Metha, 1997), thereby providing some hedonic benefit to music that would otherwise be painful.

In the literature, many researchers have found support for mood congruent preferences, or when an individual chooses music congruent with their current mood state (Hunter, Schellenberg & Griffith, 2011; Gibson, Aust & Zillmann, 2000; Chen, Zhou & Bryant, 2007). Separate researchers have found conflicting results regarding sad mood induction and music preference, suggesting that mood management theory doesn't necessarily hold true (Hunter et al., 2011). For instance, Chen et al. (2007) discovered that individuals in sad mood states were more likely to

choose sad songs over happy songs. On the other hand, Knobloch and Zillmann (2002) found that individuals in a sad mood state were more likely to choose happy over sad music. Furthermore, Friedman, Gordis, and Förster (2012) discovered an aversion to happy music in the sad mood group, due to the fact that listening to such music would feel wrong and cause some form of guilt, which would lead sad individuals to assume that happy music would fail to improve their mood.

These differences in findings could be due to the different manipulation techniques employed. For example, Knobloch and Zillman (2002) manipulated participants' sad mood state by giving them false negative feedback on a personality trait test. Friedman et al. (2012) induced a sad mood state by having participants watch a film in which they witnessed a child's reaction to losing his father. In order to see whether the effects of the sad reaction to watching this film were due to the fact that the film pertained to someone other than oneself, Taylor and Friedman (in press) manipulated sad mood by having participants either imagine themselves experiencing the loss or imagine someone else experiencing the loss. The results suggested that self-relevance was not a key moderator of the choice of expressively sad music over happy music, as both groups were more likely to choose sad music.

In trying to further clarify this discrepancy in music preference, Lee, Andrade, and Palmer (2013) were interested in finding out whether an interpersonal loss versus a noninterpersonal loss would create a greater preference to listen to sad music. An interpersonal loss would be the breaking of a social tie with another person. For instance, it could be losing someone close to you, such as your mother, or breaking up with a significant other. On the other hand, a noninterpersonal loss has to do with a failure or burden that is specific to oneself. For example, doing poorly on an exam or losing a race would be noninterpersonal losses. They

theorized that those experiencing an interpersonal loss, would be more inclined to choose sad music, as they would look for some sort of proxy friend who might experience empathy for them or with whom they might perceive an emotional bond. A proxy friend could consist of a parasocial friendship. For instance, when an individual forms a personal connection with a TV character or other media based character. Thus this parasocial friendship can form based on having experienced the same feelings the artist expressed in the song and relating to the artist or the lyrics through the emotions that the song portrays. Although they still stated that people experiencing a noninterpersonal loss would also be inclined to listen to sad music, the interpersonal loss group would have an increased desire to do so.

Another study done by Van den Tol and Edwards (2013) supports Lee et al.'s hypothesis that individuals in an interpersonal loss scenario would be more inclined to choose sad music that would serve as a proxy friend, as it provides comfort and support. Furthermore, Gray, Ishii, and Ambady (2011) found that people in an interpersonal loss situation were more likely to seek out social activities as compared to those in the noninterpersonal loss situation, who were more likely to seek out work-related activities. This further supports Lee et al.'s idea that an individual experiencing an interpersonal loss may have a stronger need to seek out social supports, which may be satisfied by sad music.

Lee et al. (2013) conducted two experiments to see whether interpersonal sadness versus noninterpersonal sadness would elicit a stronger preference to listen to expressively sad music. In the first experiment, they had participants either write about some sort of personal loss, such as losing someone you love, or a noninterpersonal loss, such as doing poorly on a test or doing worse than your competitors in a competition. They then asked the participants whether they wanted to listen to a "sad song" or a "cheerful song." They found that those in the interpersonal

loss scenario were more likely to choose sad music than those in the noninterpersonal loss scenario. In the second study, Lee et al. (2013) had participants write about losing someone (interpersonal loss) or losing a competition (noninterpersonal loss) to induce the sad mood state. Afterwards, participants were shown songs titles created for the experiment, that either had a happy title such as "Laugh and Swing" or a sad title such as "Gloomy Sunday." They were then asked to rate how much they felt like listening to each song at that moment. Results indicated that participants in the interpersonal loss group were more likely to choose sad songs over happy songs, whereas those in the noninterpersonal loss group did not seem to have a preference for sad or happy songs.

Although Lee et al.'s (2013) findings support the idea that interpersonal sadness will generate a stronger desire to listen to sad music than a noninterpersonal sadness, their study was confounded by intensity in their mood induction. For instance, it could be argued that losing someone you love is not equal in intensity to failing an exam. Therefore, the presumed effects of the interpersonal locus of the sadness may have been an artifact of these inadvertent differences in intensity. However, Lee et al. also suggest that this may due to the fact that an interpersonal sadness would facilitate a stronger desire to have some sort of social connection, which may just happen to be linked to expressively sadder music.

This study sought to address the limitation of condition intensity by newly creating equally intense interpersonal and noninterpersonal sadness manipulations. The interpersonal and noninterpersonal group manipulations used were equated for sadness in a prior study conducted by DeMarco, Taylor and Friedman (2015). The mood manipulation was also altered to increase external validity and to give greater insight into how different types of sadness may make individuals differentially inclined to choose sad over happy music.

Methods

Participants

For this study, participants were 24 male and 74 female undergraduate students at the University at Albany between the ages of 17 to 22. Participants were enrolled in introductory Psychology courses at the university and were recruited online for a "media preferences" study. They received one point extra credit for completing a psychology experiment requirement. Participants completed the study individually on computers in separate rooms.

Mood Induction

In order to manipulate mood, we assigned participants to one of three conditions, which consisted of guided visualizations meant to induce states of either interpersonal sadness, noninterpersonal sadness or neutral mood. These visualizations were developed and recorded for this study, and were each about 3 minutes in length. The female voice in the visualization started by having the participant close their eyes and relax (see Appendix).

For the Interpersonal Sadness condition, the recording took participants through an experience in which their father is in the hospital and dying and details that they would never see him again, emphasizing the loss of a significant relationship.

For the Noninterpersonal Sadness condition, participants were asked to visualize themselves waking up in a hospital bed and discovering that they had lost their eyesight permanently. Due to their blindness, their future aspirations and dreams would also be difficult, if not impossible, to reach. However, it was emphasized that their family and friends would be there to emotionally support them through this hardship, and thus not result in termination of an interpersonal relationship.

The participants in the Neutral condition were asked to imagine themselves doing laundry at a Laundromat. This was chosen due to previous research that found people generally having neutral feelings about doing laundry (Taylor & Friedman, 2015).

Materials and Procedures

For the study, participants were informed that they would be going through a guided visualization and would then be asked questions about their personality. For each of the three conditions (interpersonal sadness, noninterpersonal sadness, neutral), participants were given a manipulation check after the guided visualization in order to see whether the mood inductions had worked. Participants were asked to rate on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (extremely), what their current mood state was for each of 8 emotions: "angry", "anxious", "disgusted", "happy", "pity for others", "relaxed", "sad", and "sorry for yourself". After the visualization, participants were then asked to indicate any song that they felt like listening to at that particular moment. Once again, using the same 7 point Likert scale, participants were asked to rate the songs for each of the same 8 emotional states so as to indicate what emotions the songs were construed as expressing. As a process debriefing meant to undo any ill effects of the sadness induction, participants were then shown an 8-minute clip-featuring comedian Robin Williams (Morra, Brezner, & Gowers, 1986). Participants were then debriefed and informed that the study was completed.

Results

Raw descriptive statistics for all music preference measures are displayed in Table 1. This study attempted to see whether after controlling for the intensity of sadness, the noninterpersonal sadness condition and interpersonal sadness condition would elicit the same results as found in Lee et al. (2013) such that there was a stronger preference for mood-

congruent music in the interpersonal sadness condition than the noninterpersonal sadness condition. This was tested with a one-way ANOVA with orthogonal contrasts. These were created to assess: 1. The complex contrast between the interpersonal sad mood group and the neutral group (combined) and the non-interpersonal sad group; 2. The simple contrast between the interpersonal sad mood group and the neutral group alone. A composite measure of preferred expressive valence was created by subtracting expressive sadness from expressive happiness in the chosen song. Results on this measure showed a stronger preference for sad music among individuals in the interpersonal sadness group relative to the neutral group, $t(91) = 2.02$, $p < 0.05$. This indicates that the interpersonal sadness group was more likely to choose sad songs over happy songs than the neutral group, thus showing a mood-congruent preference. Tests from the remaining orthogonal contrasts showed no other significant differences between group preferences for sad music. In particular, there was found no significant difference for music preference between the interpersonal and noninterpersonal sadness conditions, $t(91) = 1.145$, $p = 0.255$, as was found by Lee et al. (2013). However, there was a marginal difference between the interpersonal sadness group and the remaining groups combined such that the interpersonal sadness group showed a stronger preference for mood-congruent songs than the other two groups, $t(91) = 1.86$, $p < 0.07$. This relationship may provide further support for Lee and colleagues findings that interpersonal sadness created a stronger mood-congruent preference for sad music than did noninterpersonal sadness.

Linear regressions were conducted to look at the effects of reported post-manipulation mood on music choice. Results showed that participants reporting sadder moods after induction were less likely to choose happy music, $t(91) = -3.697$, $p < 0.001$, and more likely to choose sadder songs across all conditions, $t(91) = 4.963$, $p < 0.001$. Furthermore, the results indicated

that the happier the participants reporting being after induction, the more likely they were to choose happy songs across all conditions, $t(91) = 3.867$, $p < 0.001$, and less likely they were to choose sad songs, $t(91) = -2.350$, $p < 0.021$. These results are consistent both with current literature supporting the concept of mood-congruent media choices, and that of Friedman et al. (2012) showing an aversion to happy music when sad.

Discussion

Lee et al. (2013) looked at the differences in mood-congruent music preference for interpersonal versus non-interpersonal sadness. They found a stronger preference for mood-congruent music when the participants' sadness was interpersonal versus non-interpersonal. Their study however failed to take into account the differences in sadness intensity. This study looked to replicate Lee et al.'s (2013) findings to see if the difference in mood-congruent music preference between the interpersonal sadness condition and noninterpersonal sadness condition would still exist after controlling for this confounding variable. In contrast to the Lee et al.'s (2013) study, the interpersonal and noninterpersonal sadness conditions were made to be equally intense. For instance, in the interpersonal condition participants were led to imagine losing their father, something strongly upsetting, while in the noninterpersonal sadness condition participants were led to imagine going blind, something equally devastating. Results of this study indicated that there was no statistically significant difference between the interpersonal sadness condition and the noninterpersonal sadness condition in regards to a preference for sad music. Thus, these results do not directly support the findings of Lee et al. (2013), who found this difference in mood congruent music between the interpersonal sadness and noninterpersonal sadness conditions to be significant.

However, in congruence with Lee et al.'s (2013) findings, results from this study indicated that the interpersonal sadness group was more likely to choose sad songs over happy songs than the neutral group. Furthermore, the results also showed a marginal difference between the interpersonal sadness group and the other two groups combined, with the interpersonal sadness group showing a stronger preference for mood-congruent music than the non-interpersonal and control groups together. In effect, these results could provide further evidence for Lee et al.'s (2013) claim that the interpersonal sadness condition elicited a stronger preference for sad music.

The results also indicated support of mood-congruent music preferences across all conditions. Sadder participants were more likely to choose sad songs over happy songs. On the other hand, happier participants were more likely to choose happy songs. These results provide evidence against mood management theory, which states that individuals will be more likely to choose happy songs (Knobloch & Zillman, 2002). This means the participants across conditions would have been more likely to choose happy songs over sad. However, the results contradict this theory, providing evidence for mood congruent music choices, such that individuals are more likely to choose songs that are in accordance with their current mood state. The mood congruent preferences found in this study align with findings in previous studies on music preferences (Chen et al., 2007).

Some limitations of this study should be addressed in future research. Because this study was done in a lab setting, more research should be conducted in order test its ecological validity to see how likely people are to use music to alter their mood in real life. Moreover, the study also asked participants to choose a song they felt like listening to at that particular moment. This

method was chosen in order to increase ecological validity, however it requires cognitive access to song titles which participants may or may not remember at the time of the experiment.

Future research should look at how listening to a happy or sad song when in a state of interpersonal sadness affects one's mood. A person's mood might improve through listening to a happy song as implied by the hedonic principle, or it might worsen, because the happy song is at odds with their current mood state. On the other hand, listening to a sad song might aid in mood repair despite the negative expressive tone of the music. Based on the results conducted in this study and other studies, it seems likely that a person's mood would improve by listening to mood congruent music. This particular research is interesting. If these results were found, this would inform individuals of a possible way to improve their mood and cope with state sadness by listening to sad music. The results would also show whether people may be at odds with how they predicted they would feel and how they actually feel after listening to the song.

In conclusion, this study provides support for mood-congruent music preference. It also seems there may be a difference in music preference based on the content of the emotion. Future studies may also reflect whether other moods such as anger or confusion become salient when participants listen to a happy or sad song, which might even overshadow the feelings of happiness or sadness. On the other hand, listening to a sad or happy song may create a mixture between emotions, rendering not only feelings of happiness or sadness, but for example sadness and anger or happiness and confusion. Futhermore, these studies could also tie in as possible aids in settings such as music therapy. For example, if listening to sad songs in an interpersonal loss situation causes people's mood to improve, then employing this method may help someone who lost a loved one to be able to better overcome their loss.

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Appendix A:

Table 1

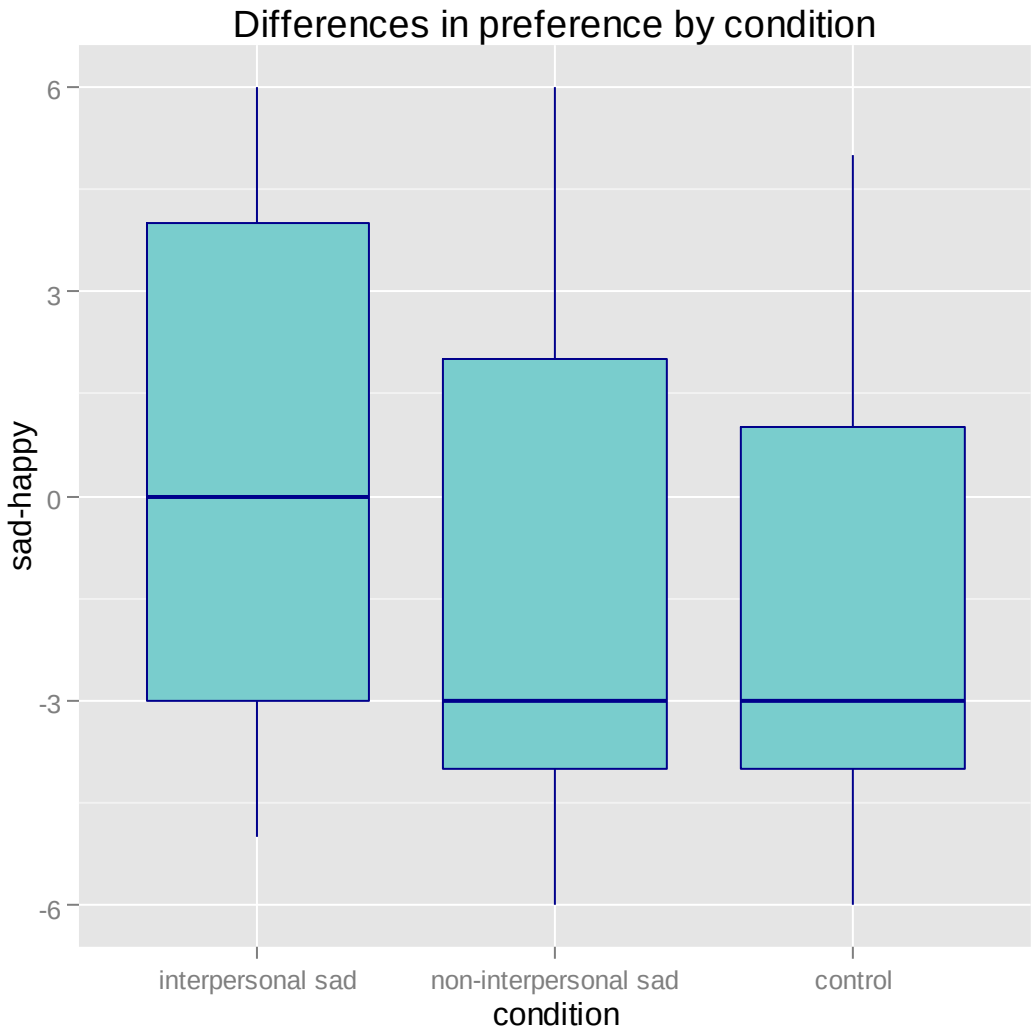
Descriptive Statistics for Music Preference Measures Indexed by Condition

	Mood					
	Sad (Interpersonal)		Sad (Noninterpersonal)		Neutral	
Item	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
1. To what extent does this song express *anger*?	2.27	1.72	1.97	1.36	1.81	1.30
2. To what extent does this song express *anxiety*?	2.50	1.82	2.27	1.65	2.00	1.51
3. To what extent does this song express *disgust*?	2.13	1.38	1.52	0.94	1.68	1.30
4. To what extent does this song express *happiness*?	3.73	1.84	4.24	2.17	4.65	1.70
5. To what extent does this song express *pity for others*?	2.37	1.56	2.27	1.78	2.58	1.67
6. To what extent does this song express *relaxation*?	3.77	1.79	4.03	1.96	4.58	2.11
7. To what extent does this song express *sadness*?	3.87	2.29	3.24	2.17	2.87	2.03
8. To what extent does this song express *sorry for yourself*?	2.10	1.56	2.67	2.00	2.23	1.93

Note. Measures 1-8 used 7-point scales: 1(*not at all*) to 7(*extremely*)

Appendix B

Differences in Music Preference by Condition



Appendix C

Scripts for Guided Visualizations

Prior to All Visualizations: Close your eyes and relax deeply. Focus your attention on your breathing and take some deep breaths, relaxing your muscles a little more with each exhale. Begin to count backwards from three-hundred. Three-hundred...Two ninety-nine...Two ninety-eight...Two ninety-seven...Two ninety-six. Relax the muscles in your jaw. Two ninety-three. Relax the muscles in your neck and let your shoulders drop. Two eighty-nine. Be comfortably aware of your body and feel its weight and warmth.

Interpersonal Sadness Induction

Imagine you are in a hospital room. You are standing around a bed with other members of your family, looking down at your dying father. Everyone in the room is crying and whispering about how fragile he looks. He calls out for you and you go to the edge of the bed, but he can't see you. He looks scared and it makes you deeply sad. He leans back on the pillow with his eyes closed and suddenly his body falls limp. Everyone around you begins to sob loudly. You reach for his hand, but it falls away. You call out to him. You plead with him to wake up and open his eyes, but he only lays there. Your body goes numb and all you can hear is those around you crying. Some of them look down at you with grief, their eyes swollen and their faces tear-streaked. Some of them can't even look at you. They only shake their heads as they cry. You realize that your dad is not coming back. He will never hug you again. You will never see him smile or hear his laugh. You long to hear his voice just once more. You think of all the times ahead when your dad will not be there and all the things you'll never be able to experience together. All the time you had spent together will never feel like it was enough. You would give anything for just one more minute together. You think of your regrets over and over again and

how you wish you could have said “I love you” just one more time. It feels as if this sadness and despair will never go away and you will forever have a feeling of emptiness in your heart. You feel utterly alone. Everyone in the room begins to become indistinct dark figures as your eyes fill with tears to the point that you can no longer see.

Noninterpersonal Sadness Induction

Imagine you are laying in a bed in a hospital room. You can hear the voices of your family and friends, but when you open your eyes, you can’t see them. You can’t make out any figures or colors, you only see darkness. You blink hard to try to get your eyes open, but realize they are already open. A doctor comes in and in a calm and kind tone, gently tells you that you have lost your sight and that there is no hope that you will ever be able to see again. Your body goes numb and you think that maybe you are dreaming. You dig your nails into the skin on your arm, trying to pinch yourself awake, but nothing changes. You can feel warm tears pooling in your now useless eyes, as you realize you are indeed awake. Your family and friends try to offer comforting words, but all of the voices in the room fade into silence. You realize your eyesight will never come back. You will no longer be able to care for yourself as you had before. You will have to rely on your family and friends in order to complete even simple tasks. You think about all of the things that you will never be able to enjoy the same way. The decorations and lights that you loved to see so much during the holidays or the sun setting on the water’s horizon at the beach. You think of all of the trips you had planned on taking and how you'll never be able to see the places you've longed to visit. All of the dreams that you’d had for a career after college are over and if you have children, you will never be able to see their faces. Your heart weighs heavy in your chest. You know that your family and friends will be there to help you, but you feel utterly hopeless. While you will continue to exist, you will never be able to experience or

enjoy anything the way you used to ever again. Even though you'll live on, it feels as though your life is over.

Neutral (Control) Induction

Imagine you are in a Laundromat because you have to do laundry. Although doing laundry is not your favorite pastime and you find it a little boring, you have also always found it to be a little relaxing. You place your clothes hamper on the counter next to a row of empty machines and fill one machine with towels and one machine with jeans and t-shirts. After you pour in the liquid laundry detergent, you walk across the room to the change machine and slide a $5 bill into the slot. The machine makes metal clinking sounds as it dispenses the quarters. You insert 5 quarters into the slot and push the handle down on each of the machines, so that they begin almost simultaneously. You sit on the bench at the front of the room and wait patiently for your clothes. After about 30 minutes of daydreaming, the machines buzz, signifying that your clothes are done washing. The dryers are much larger than the washing machines, so you figure you can just dry both loads of laundry together in one dryer. You place all of your clothes into the dryer and swing the door shut. After dispensing a dollar in quarters into the machine, you push the button for the medium heat setting and the dryer turns on. You listen to the dryer humming and resume daydreaming about what you will do for the rest of the day. When the dryer buzzes you empty all of your clothes back into the hamper and carry them over to an empty counter. You wipe the top of the tiled counter down with paper towels and disinfectant and wait for it to dry, before dumping your laundry out onto the countertop. After folding each item you place it with the other folded items, creating a tower of tshirts and jeans and big fluffy towels. After you have folded all of the laundry, you gently place each piece back into the hamper and leave the Laundromat.