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# What Goes Around Comes Around: The Integrated Role of Emotions on Consumer Ethical Decision Making.

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## ***Abstract***

The current study aims to further our understanding of the integrated role of emotions on consumer decision making involving ethical issues, by considering the influence of both positive and negative emotions on ethical decision making process. It considers not only the emotions experienced prior to ethical decision making (pre-decision emotions) but also those resulting from the course of action chosen (post-decision emotions). Scenarios are used, and the results of the structural modelling analyses support the proposed relationships between current emotions, consumers' ethical decision making, post-decision emotions and future ethical behavioural intentions. The data suggest the possible existence of a "virtuous ethical cycle", whereby positive emotions lead to more ethical consumer decisions and behaviours; and these in turn lead to more positive (post-decision) emotions, which have a positive and significant effect on future ethical behavioural intentions. In addition, happiness emerges as exerting a pivotal role in predicting consumer ethical decisions.

## **Keywords**

Consumer Ethics; Ethical Decision Making; Positive Emotions; Negative Emotions; Happiness;  
Future Ethical Behavioural Intentions.

## 1. Introduction

In the last decades, scholars from a variety of academic backgrounds have revealed an increasing interest in ethical decision making (Damasio, 1994; Greene & Haidt, 2002; Schwartz, 2016). Understanding why individuals think, decide and act ethically – or unethically – remains one of the most relevant, and at the same time complex, topics in the current business research agenda, in a bid to deepen our understanding of how ethical decisions are made and how ethical judgments and actions can be promoted.

The relevance of ethical decision making in the business context is no longer in doubt, if not for moral reasons, at least due to the significant costs that illegal and/or unethical behaviours can bring to shareholders, employees, consumers and the environment (Schwartz, 2016). While generally not in the spotlight to the same extent as firm actions, consumers' ethical (or unethical) decisions are not absent of consequences either. It has been estimated that retail crime in Europe costs firms 70.85 \$billion a year, for example; and loss preventing spending represented 0.74% of total retail sales during 2014-2015 (Global Retail Theft Barometer, 2015). Activities such as shoplifting, illegal downloads, getting too much change due to a cashier mistake, consuming products inside a retail store, traveling on public transports without buying a ticket, or switching price tags to pay less for a product are just some examples of situations in which consumers are confronted with issues of good and bad, right and wrong, fair and unfair.

Theoretical advances explaining consumer decision making in situations involving ethics have been significant over the past few decades. In business, a substantial part of the literature assumes that ethics is primarily a cognitive, deliberate and rational process. In this perspective, moral reasoning is understood as dominating the process of resolving conflicts in the face of ethical dilemmas (Ferrell & Gresham, 1985; Hunt & Vitell, 1986; Jones, 1991; Trevino, 1986). The importance of these contributions notwithstanding, it has been suggested that rationalist approaches overlook an important component in achieving a comprehensive understanding of

consumer ethical decision making: emotions (Gaudine & Thorne, 2001; Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley, & Cohen, 2001; Haidt, 2001; Koenigs et al., 2007).

Cognitive neuroscience, a field which has long been interested in this topic, proposes a dual-process theory of moral judgment (Greene, Nystrom, Engell, Darley, & Cohen, 2004; Greene et al., 2001; Haidt, 2001), which considers that ethical judgments result from an interaction of emotional and cognitive complex neural mechanisms. This is consistent with empirical research suggesting that ethical decision making goes beyond strictly reason-based processes, and is also a result of intuitive, automatic and emotional evaluations (Damasio, 1994; Haidt, 2001).

Emotion is understood, in this perspective, as a key element of ethical decision making (Robertson, Voegtlin, & Maak, 2017; Salvador & Folger, 2009) and a source of pivotal information (Ruedy, Moore, Gino, & Schweitzer, 2013), which can influence individuals' propensity to identify ethical dilemmas (Gaudine & Thorne, 2001; Robertson et al., 2007), facilitate ethical judgments (Haidt, 2007; Mudrack & Mason, 2013; Winterich, Morales, & Mittal, 2015) and support ethical choices and behaviours (Antonetti & Maklan, 2014b; Connelly, Helton-Fauth, & Mumford, 2004; Greene & Haidt, 2002).

Despite these advances, there is still room to further our understanding of consumer decision making involving ethics. In particular, the research on ethical decision making is still skewed towards firms, rather than consumers; and towards rational processes, rather than emotional ones. In addition, where emotions are considered, the focus has traditionally been on singular emotional states, with primacy given to positive, rather than negative emotions; and on specific stages of the consumer ethical decision making process, rather than the process in its entirety. This study aims to address these issues by examining the integrated role of emotions on consumer decision making involving ethics. Putting the role of emotions in consumer ethical decisions at its core, this research considers not only pre-decision emotions, but also those resulting from the (ethical or unethical) decision made, and analyses a range of emotions, both

positive and negative, involved on the consumer ethical decision making process; thus hoping to redress the above-mentioned imbalances.

Better understanding ethical decision making processes and the role of emotions within them is fundamental to encouraging more ethical consumer behaviours, including rewarding companies for their ethical and socially responsible actions through purchases and loyalty. This study aims to contribute to this overarching goal by assessing the role that both positive and negative emotions play not only as antecedent, but also as outcome of consumer decision making process involving ethics, providing relevant managerial insights about how consumer ethical decisions are formed, and how future ethical behaviours can be promoted and unethical actions prevented.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section two presents the relevant conceptual background, upon which our hypotheses are based. Section three describes the methodological procedures followed; and section four presents and discusses the results. In the final section, conclusions and avenues for further research are proposed.

## **2. Literature Review and Hypothesis development**

### *2.1. Ethical Decision Making*

Ethics comprises “the study and philosophy of human conduct with an emphasis on determining right and wrong” (Fraedrich, Ferrell, & Ferrell, 2013: 7) and can be defined as “a belief system which guides moral judgments and actions” (Schlegelmilch, 1998: 7). Ethical decision making, in turn, refers to the “process by which individuals use their moral base to determine whether a certain issue is right or wrong” (Carlson, Kacmar, & Wadsworth, 2009: 536). Ethics has to do with one’s moral behaviour with respect to others and to society (Fischer, 2004). Due to the increasing relevance of the topic, some subfields have emerged from the broad area of study of ethics (DesJardins, 2014). One of these is business ethics, which refers to

the “examination and application of moral standards within the context of finance, commerce, production, distribution, and sale of goods and services, and other forms of business” (Sausser, 2005: 346). Its counterpart, consumer ethics, in turn describes “the moral principles and standards that guide behaviour of individuals or groups as they obtain, use, and dispose of goods and services.” (Muncy & Vitell, 1992: 298).

As awareness of the potential consequences of unethical decisions has increased, so too has the study of ethical decision making in the last decades (Schwartz, 2016). Initially explored from a managerial/firm-based perspective (Agnihotri, Rapp, Kothandaraman, & Singh, 2012), ethical decision making has more recently been committed with the consumer point of view as well (Escadas, Jalali, & Farhangmehr, 2019b), since all aspects of consumer behaviour have an ethical component (Vitell, 2003). Consumer ethics has thus become increasingly important, with its study aiming to determine how consumer decisions in situations involving ethical issues are made and how consumer ethical judgments and behaviours can be promoted.

The ethical decision making process is traditionally described as comprising four main stages (Rest, 1986). It begins with individuals’ recognition that a situation or action may conflict with one or more moral standards, thus endowing it with an ethical component, i.e. *ethical awareness*. After a moral issue is acknowledged, individuals make judgments or choices among the potential alternatives about the ethically correct course of action, i.e. *ethical judgment*. Intentions are then established to carry out the ethical action, i.e. *ethical intentions*; and, finally, individuals engage in ethical behaviours supported by one or more moral standards, i.e. *ethical behaviours* (Rest, 1986). This four-component model for individual ethical decision making has become one of the most used and tested theoretical models for explaining the temporal and sequential stages that lead to ethical actions (Craft, 2013; Lehnert, Park, & Singh, 2015; O’Fallon & Butterfield, 2005).

Consistent with Rest's (1986) model, most of the research on business ethics, both conceptual and empirical, has traditionally relied on a rationalist-based approach (Vitell, King, & Singh, 2013), focusing primarily on understanding the role of logical, rational and deliberate cognitive processes when facing an ethical dilemma (Ferrell & Gresham, 1985; Hunt & Vitell, 1986; Jones, 1991; Trevino, 1986). The findings resulting from such approaches, however, have not always been consistent (Craft, 2013; Pan & Sparks, 2012). For instance, Kohlberg (1979) proposed a positive relationship between education and ethical judgment, suggesting that people with a better understanding of complex issues, such as moral issues, will exhibit more sophisticated levels of moral reasoning. However, empirical research fails to find an association between education and ethical judgments (Cagle & Baucus, 2006; Marques & Azevedo-Pereira, 2009) or report negative connections (Chiu, 2003; Fullerton, Kerch, & Dodge, 1996). Regarding income, empirical research indicated that lower levels of income are associated with greater ethical concerns (Muncy & Vitell, 1992), while others found the opposite (Hoon Ang, Sim Cheng, Lim, & Kuan Tambyah, 2001) or no significant relationship (Paolillo & Vitell, 2003). Age also produced mixed results, describing positive (Valentine & Rittenburg, 2007), negative (Ede, Panigrahi, Stuart, & Calcich, 2000) or no significant (Marques & Azevedo-Pereira, 2009) relationships between age and ethical decisions. The lack of consistent empirical findings lead to calls for further research to test for additional influence factors and moderators of ethical decision making (O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2005) or to develop a more comprehensive theoretical platform to improve existing models' explanatory and predictive capability (Tenbrunsel & Smith-Crowe, 2008).

One such model has been developed by Zollo, Pellegrini, & Ciappei (2017). Their dual processing model of ethical decision making combines moral intuition (System 1), which is unconscious and automatic, with a subsequent rational and reflective ethical decision making process (System 2) (Zollo, 2020; Zollo et al., 2017). The moral intuition process (System 1) is further divided into two phases: *intuiting* and *emotional processing*. *Intuiting* is the non-conscious first stage of a



decision maker's process of moral intuition, which is "activated by the immediate, fast, effortful and automatic System 1" without any link with System 2 reasoning processes (Zollo et al., 2017: 687). *Emotional processing*, in turn, refers to the "emotional unconscious" of human cognition (Zollo et al., 2017), usually labelled as the "hot emotive system" (Metcalfe & Mischel, 1999), which is composed of basic emotions – such as happiness, sadness, anger or surprise – and responsible for quick emotional and impulsive processing (Haidt, 2001).

While recognising the importance of both sides (rational and emotional) of the ethical decision making coin, the focus in this study will be on the role of emotions in ethical decision making, because although both approaches are necessary and should be integrated, there is comparatively less research on the role of emotions – an influence which needs to be well understood for the two approaches to be combined. Furthermore, emotions have typically been studied as antecedents of ethical decision making, whereas here they are analysed as both antecedents and consequences; and finally, research has traditionally focused on one stage of the ethical decision making process at a time, whereas here all four stages are analysed. Thus, in this study we explore the integrated role of the 'hot' emotional processing on ethical reasoning, both as input and also as outcome, by examining how different types of emotions affect ethical decision making process.

## *2.2. Emotions and Ethical Decision Making*

Models describing moral reasoning, dating back to the contributions of Kohlberg (1969), suggested that ethical decision making is primarily a result of a conscious and deliberate reasoning process. More recently, neuroscience research offers the dual-process theory of moral judgment, which suggests that ethical decisions and behaviours are a result of immediate, intuitive, emotional as well as reasoned processes (Greene et al., 2004, 2001; Haidt, 2001).

Emotion is the support system for reasoning processes (Damasio, 2000), and as such, it is both necessary and sufficient for moral decisions (Prinz, 2006). The affective component plays a pivotal role in resolving moral conflicts (Koenigs et al., 2007) and emotional processing disorders are associated with weakened moral behaviour (Anderson, Bechara, Damasio, Tranel, & Damasio, 1999; Mendez, Anderson, & Shapira, 2005).

Research shows that the regions of the brain responsible for the generation of emotions have higher levels of activation when facing relevant ethical stimuli – ethical sensitivity (Moll, de Oliveira-Souza, Bramati, & Grafman, 2002); and that having lesions in these parts of the brain significantly increases utilitarian judgments conducive to inflicting direct harm to others – ethical judgment (Koenigs et al., 2007). Furthermore, emotion activates brain networks associated with behavioural intentions in response to ethically relevant situations – ethical intention (Borg, Hynes, Van Horn, Grafton, & Sinnott-Armstrong, 2006); and the brain circuits that play critical roles in emotional processing have been shown to be activated to a greater extent when individuals behave ethically – ethical behaviour (King, Blair, Mitchell, Dolan, & Burgess, 2006).

These findings from neuroscience are a particularly important base upon which to build on in the business research on ethical decision making, because they are “less subject to social desirability bias than survey research methods using participants’ self-reports about their emotional and cognitive processes. In brain imaging research, it is possible to investigate processes of which subjects themselves are not aware.” (Robertson, Voegtlin, & Maak, 2017: 680).

As such, the relationship between emotions and ethical decision making has also been receiving increased attention in the management context (Craft, 2013; Schwartz, 2016; Vitell et al., 2013 for review). Gaudine & Thorne (2001) propose that, rather than antithetical, emotion is intrinsic to rational ethical decision making and that this affective component directly influences the

entire ethical deliberation process – individuals’ ethical sensitivity, judgments, intentions and behaviours. There is also empirical evidence of a significant role of emotions on: individuals’ judgments of another person’s unethical behaviour (Winterich et al., 2015); a whistle-blower or witness’ decision to speak on matters of substantial public interest (Hollings, 2013); consumers’ perceptions of the effectiveness of sustainable consumption choices (Antonetti & Maklan, 2014b, 2014a); the ethical attitudes and behaviours of salespeople in a relational selling context (Agnihotri et al., 2012); and consumer engagement in pro-environmental behaviours, such as recycling paper, saving water or using public transportation (Bissing-Olson, Fielding, & Iyer, 2016; Elgaaied, 2012; Onwezen, Antonides, & Bartels, 2013). Linehan & O’Brien (2017) found that emotions, both felt and displayed during a personal interaction, evoke signals that something ‘isn’t right’, subsequently influencing the awareness and understanding of ethical dilemmas, such as, for example, the termination of an employee’s employment contract. Singh, Garg, Govind, & Vitell (2016) showed that incidental emotions can influence the levels of ethical judgment in a consumer context (i.e., too much change received); while Harvey, Martinko, & Borkowski (2017) demonstrated that negative affective workplace events promote the justification of deviant behaviours.

An examination of the contributions to the literature described above underlines two points: first, business research on ethical decision making typically focuses on a single stage of the ethical deliberation process, although the theory presents the ethical deliberation process as a set of temporal, sequential and interrelated stages (Rest, 1986; Schwartz, 2016); meaning there is need for an integrated analysis of the four components that make up the whole ethical decision making process. Second, while the study of the effects of specific emotions on individuals’ action tendencies towards (un)ethical behaviours is quite well established, the relationship between simultaneous positive/negative emotions and consumer ethical decisions is less clear. These research aims to fill these gaps by examining the integrated role of several positive and negative emotions on all four stages of the ethical decision making process.

Positive and negative emotions have different antecedents and, thus, lead to different outcomes (Cropanzano, 2003) via different psychological pathways (Miles, Borman, Spector, & Fox, 2002; Spector & Fox, 2002). The cognitive appraisal theory of emotions (Smith & Ellsworth, 1985) states that different emotions are defined by different cognitive appraisals, which lead to diverse influences on decision making.

The literature suggests that positive emotions can encourage ethical decisions and behaviours in the business context. Agnihotri et al. (2012), for instance, showed that positive trait-based emotion influences salespeople's ethical attitudes and behaviours; Mencl & May (2009) found that empathy, a positive emotion, facilitates ethical decision making in human resource managers; and Belschak & Den Hartog (2009) suggested that positive emotions are linked to students' and employees' intentions to engage in organisational citizenship behaviours (i.e. voluntary actions to promote the welfare of colleagues and/or that benefit the organisational image).

But while the influence of positive emotions on ethical decision making is quite well supported, the effect of negative emotions on ethical behaviours and the direction of this impact is less clear and has yielded contradictory evidence. Lerner & Keltner (2000) indicated that negative emotions may produce pessimistic as well as optimistic judgments about future events; Singh et al. (2016) stated that negative discrete emotions influence ethical judgements; Cropanzano, Stein, & Nadisic (2011) found that negative emotions derived from frustrating work events lead to retaliatory behavioural intentions converted into unethical behaviours; while Jacobs, Belschak, & Den Hartog (2014) uncovered that negative emotion was related to unethical work behaviours of police officers.

Despite some contradictory findings, the main body of business research thus suggests that positive emotions will stimulate pro-social and cooperative decisions and behaviours, while negative emotions may facilitate unethical courses of actions through retaliatory behavioural

intentions (Cropanzano et al., 2011). Considering that positive and negative emotions will impact consumer ethical decisions differently, this research assumes that positive emotions (such as happiness or gladness) are likely to lead to more ethical decisions, while negative emotions (such as sadness or guilt) are less likely to do so. Therefore, it is proposed that:

**H1:** Positive emotions will positively influence ethical consumer decisions.

**H2:** Negative emotions will negatively influence ethical consumer decisions.

Previous research mainly posits emotions as antecedents of ethical decision making (Escadas, Jalali, & Farhangmehr, 2019a). Significant literature contributions demonstrate that emotions influence ethical sensitivity (Robertson et al., 2007), judgments (Schwartz, 2016), intentions (Vitell et al., 2013) and behaviours (Agnihotri et al., 2012). More recent studies, however, suggest that emotions may play an integrated role on ethical decision making, not only as antecedents, but also as feedback systems that allow consumers to learn from past experiences (Baumeister, Vohs, Nathan DeWall, & Liqing Zhang, 2007). Antonetti & Maklan (2014a), for instance, find that consumers have feelings about their purchases and feel pride when they buy responsible products, and guilt when choose unethical products. Ruedy et al., (2013) show that individuals who engage in unethical behaviours, such as cheating (by over-reporting their performance or lying on a timesheet in order to earn a bonus, for example) feel higher levels of negative affect and lower levels of positive affect. After a decision involving an ethical component, consumers start a process of emotional appraisal, which activates a self-conscious cognitive process that helps understand the relevance of the issue involved (Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007) and raises awareness of the consequences of the choices (ethical or unethical) made (Bray, Johns, & Kilburn, 2011). Thus, it is not only pre-decision emotions that are of concern, but also those resulting from the decisions themselves (i.e. post-decision emotions).

In this research, we adopt the assumption that ethical behaviours lead to positive emotions (i.e., being ethical, or doing the “right thing”, makes us “feel good”), while unethical behaviours tend to cause negative emotions (i.e., they make us “feel bad”). Thus, it is proposed that:

**H3:** Ethical consumer decisions will increase positive post-decision emotions.

**H4:** Ethical consumer decisions will reduce negative post-decision emotions.

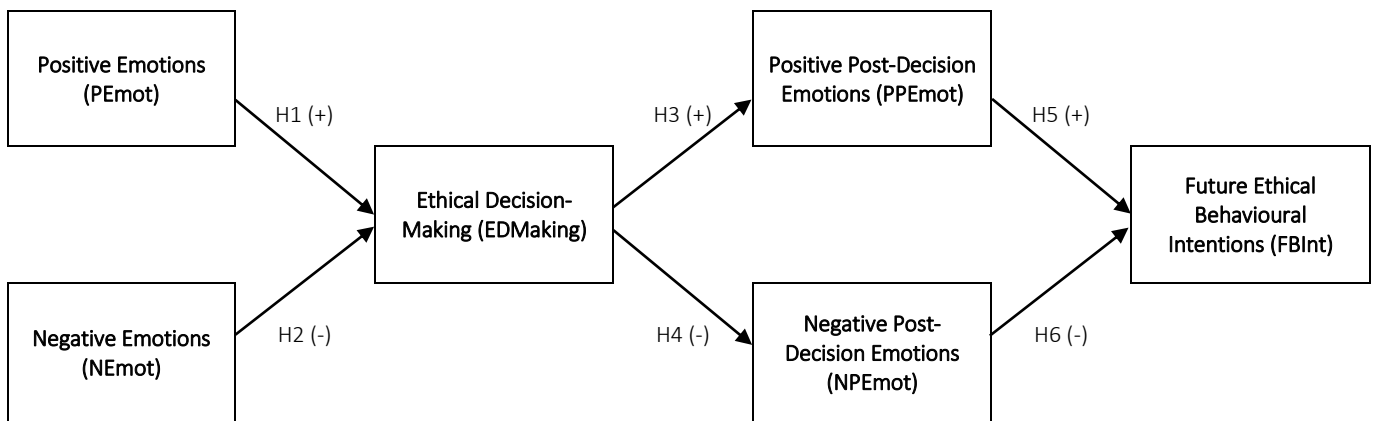
Research shows that both sensitivity to ethical issues and evaluations of the appropriateness of choices in personal ethical dilemmas are associated with the activation of specific regions of the brain, also implicated in the experience of emotion (Mayberg et al., 1999) and in the recall of emotional memories (Maddock, Garrett, & Buonocore, 2003; Maratos, Dolan, Morris, Henson, & Rugg, 2001). Robertson et al. (2007) argue that the activation of these brain circuits may reflect access to one’s emotional, cognitive and somatic experiences related to previous ethical conflicts, which is consistent with the idea that ethical judgments are associated with memories from past ethical decisions (Anderson et al. 1999) and that emotions learned from past decisions provide key information which influences future ethical behaviours (Antonetti & Maklan (2014a). Since emotions are a motivation to act (Eisenberg, 2000; Huebner, Dwyer, & Hauser, 2009), emotional memories learned from past experiences are expected to influence future ethical behavioural intentions. Thus, it is proposed that:

**H5:** Positive post-decision emotions will increase consumers’ ethical behavioural intentions.

**H6:** Negative post-decision emotions will reduce consumers’ ethical behavioural intentions.

Figure 1 shows the proposed research model, whereby emotions exert an influence on ethical decision making, positively influencing ethical decisions in the case of positive emotions, and negatively influencing ethical decisions in the case of negative emotions. The decision itself then triggers another set of (post-decision) emotions, more likely to be positive when the decision was ethical, and more likely to be negative when it was not. These post-decision emotions are then in turn expected to affect intentions regarding future behaviours.

Figure 1: Proposed Research Model.



### 3. Methods

#### 3.1. Procedures and Sample

To test the proposed hypotheses, a self-administered paper and pencil questionnaire, using a scenario-based approach, was applied. Scenarios have long been recognized as particularly suited to marketing ethics research (Hunt & Vitell, 1986) and have been widely used in the business ethics literature (Dietz & Kleinlogel, 2013; Singhapakdi, Vitell, Lee, Nisius, & Yu, 2013; Winterich et al., 2015). Scenarios allow consumer ethical issues to be presented in a concrete and detailed manner, while controlling environmental factors (O’Fallon & Butterfield, 2005), and standardize social and contextual stimuli (Alexander & Becker, 1978), imbuing respondents’ answers and decision making with added realism, and giving researchers access to their attitudes and judgments to ethical decision situations (Trevino, 1992).

Three different scenarios were developed, to reduce situation bias and improve the accuracy of the analyses. The scenarios pertained to: *i*) photocopying (rather than purchasing) a copyrighted book, recommended for a university course; *ii*) switching price tags in a store, to pay less for one’s favourite shirt; and *iii*) keeping extra money mistakenly handed to us by a bank teller in a withdrawal.

Data were collected from a convenience sample using face-to-face street and class interviews. Participants were invited to participate in the study after a detailed description of research objectives and procedures, and were encouraged to fill out the questionnaires themselves in order to avoid interviewer and/or social desirability bias. Participation was voluntary and no incentives were provided. The study was conducted in the region of Braga, in the North of Portugal. A valid sample of 433 respondents was collected, of whom 60,7% were female and 39,3% were male. The mean age of the participants was 26,41 years and 48,7% were students.

### *3.2. Measures*

Prior being exposed to the ethical scenarios, respondents were asked to rate the emotions they were feeling at that moment. These emotions were measured using an adapted version of the 17 anticipatory goal-directed emotions proposed by Bagozzi, Baumgartner, & Pieters (1998), including the contributions of Kugler & Jones' (1992) guilt inventory and Tracy & Robins' (2007) authentic pride scale. Four positive and four negative emotions were included in questionnaire and measured on a seven-point scale ranging from 1- "Not at all" to 7-"Very much". The question was posed as follows: "At this moment, I feel: glad; happy; satisfied; excited; ashamed; guilty; sad; uncomfortable". Positive and negative emotions were presented alternately and ordered randomly to minimize common method bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003).

As previously described, ethical decision making has been conceptualized as comprising awareness, judgment, intention and behaviour (Rest, 1986). Rather than focusing on a single stage, as is more common in the literature, the aim here was to examine all four steps in the process. Thus, after reading each of the ethical scenarios, participants were invited to answer questions pertaining to each of those stages of the ethical decision making process. Ethical awareness was measured through a single item: "For me, the behaviour described above



involves an ethical problem”, adapted from Karande, Shankarmahesh, Rao, & Rashid (2000) and rated on a seven-point Likert scale from 1-“Strongly disagree” to 7-“Strongly agree”.

Ethical judgment was assessed using a four-item modified version of the moral equity dimension proposed by Reidenbach & Robin's (1990) multidimensional ethics scale. Participants were invited to express their evaluations regarding the scenarios, based on the statement: “For me, the situation described above is: wrong–right; unfair–fair; unethical-ethical; not morally right-morally right”, using a seven-point semantic differential scale. Ethical intention was evaluated by asking the respondents if they would act in the same manner as the consumer depicted in the scenario, consistent with Vitell & Patwardhan (2008) and Vitell, Singhapakdi, & Thomas (2001), and measured on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1-“Strongly disagree” to 7-“Strongly agree”. Finally, ethical behaviour was appraised by a single item: for Scenario 1, this was “I usually photocopy copyrighted books.”; for Scenario 2, “I usually switch the price tags in stores.”; and for scenario 3 – “I usually keep extra money mistakenly handed to me for myself.” Respondents were invited to evaluate the statements on a seven-point Likert scale, where 1 - “Strongly disagree” and 7 - “Strongly agree”. Scales measuring ethical judgment, intention and behaviour were reversed and higher scores indicated a higher ethical decision. Because in addition to assessing ethical decisions and behaviours, we were also interested in evaluating individual emotions arising from the ethical deliberation process, post-decision emotions were measured by asking respondents to rate their emotions after making their decisions with regard to the ethical scenarios presented. The same items used to measure baseline emotions at the beginning of the questionnaire were used for this purpose. Thus, respondents were asked: “After these decisions concerning the scenario described, I feel: guilty; proud; remorseful; accomplished; uncomfortable; happy; ashamed; confident; sad; satisfied”, ranked on a seven-point scale ranging from 1-“Not at all” to 7-“Very much”.

Finally, in order to test the hypothesis that post-decision emotions influence future behavioural intentions, respondents were asked to report the likelihood that they would act ethically as consumers in the future. Participants completed a two-item question adapted from previous research (Antonetti & Maklan, 2014a) that captures their intentions to act and buy ethically. The following items were answered using a seven-point scale, ranging from 1-“Not at all” to 7-“Very much”: for Scenario 1 – “Next time you need a new book: How likely is it that you will act in an ethical way? How likely is it that you will buy the copyrighted book?”; For Scenario 2 – “Next time you go shopping: How likely is it that you will act in an ethical way? How likely is it that you will pay the marked price for the products?”; For Scenario 3 – “Next time you mistakenly receive extra money: How likely is it that you will act in an ethical way? How likely is it that you will hand back the extra money?”

#### 4. Results

To test the validity of the proposed model, a two-step structural equation modelling was performed (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2014), using AMOS 24. Table 1 provides an overview of the means, standard deviations and correlations between the constructs.

**Table 1:** Construct Correlation Matrix

Construct	Mean	Std. Dev.	Correlation matrix						
			1	2	3	4	5	6	
1. Positive Emotions	4,87	0,99	<b>0,760<sup>a)</sup></b>						
2. Negative Emotions	2,07	1,04	-0,162***	<b>0,730<sup>a)</sup></b>					
3. Ethical Decision-Making	5,71	1,36	0,422***	-0,350***	<b>0,783<sup>a)</sup></b>				
4. Positive Post-Decision Emotions	4,39	1,73	0,352***	-0,164***	0,568***	<b>0,850<sup>a)</sup></b>			
5. Negative Post-Decision Emotions	2,05	1,34	-0,218***	0,436***	-0,551***	-0,553***	<b>0,809<sup>a)</sup></b>		
6. Future Behavioural Intentions	5,68	1,50	0,345***	-0,204***	0,753***	0,514***	-0,437***	<b>0,901<sup>a)</sup></b>	

\*\*\* p < 0.01

a) Square root of the AVE in bold on the diagonal to test Discriminant Validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981)

In order to assess construct validity, individual item reliability was evaluated by examining the factor loadings of each measure on its corresponding construct. All factor loadings were equal or greater than .578 (Table 2), thus over the recommended threshold of .50 (Hair et al., 2014). In addition, the average variance extracted (AVE) of all the factors exceeded the minimum recommended criterion of .50, indicating that a large portion of the variance was explained by the constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The internal consistency of multiple items for each construct was measured by their composite reliability and all scores were above the cut-off value of .70, ensuring adequate internal consistency (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). All these indicators suggest adequate convergent validity among item measures (Hair et al., 2014). Moreover, to assess discriminant validity, the square roots of the AVE were used, which should be greater than a construct's correlation with any other construct in the model (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The values of the square root of the AVE can be seen on the diagonal of Table 1, and indicate that the criterion of discriminant validity was met for all the constructs analysed.

Regarding the model fit, Hair et al., (2014) suggest reporting at least one absolute fit index and one incremental fit index ( $\chi^2=459.457$ ,  $p=0,000$ ;  $df=233$ ;  $\chi^2/df=1.972$ ; CFI=0.967; TLI=0.961; NFI=0.935; GFI=0.916; RMSEA=0.047) (Table 2). Results show a satisfactory fit of the model, thus providing evidence of nomological validity (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988) and an appropriate basis for testing the hypothesized relationships.

**Table 2:** Measurement Model and Scale Reliability.

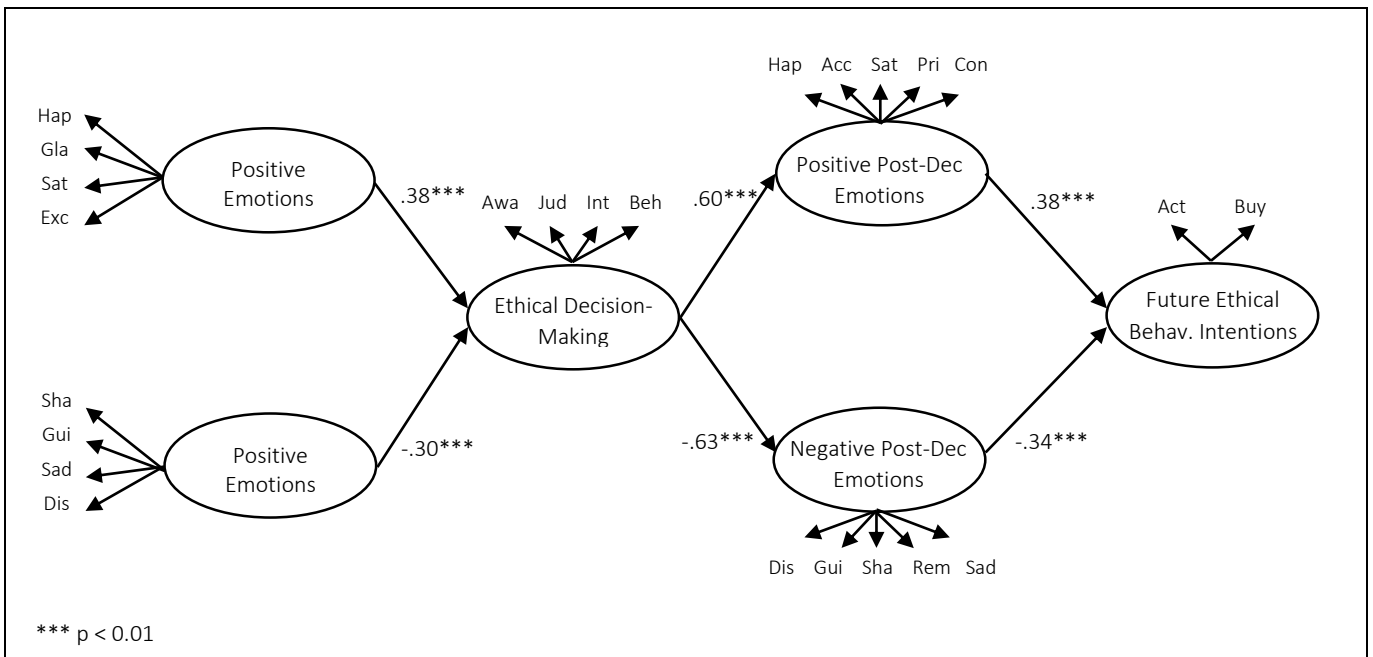
Item description	Standardized loadings	Reliability	
		SCR	AVE
<b>Positive Emotions (PEmot)</b>		0.841	0.578
Happiness	0.916		
Gladness	0.862		
Satisfaction	0.628		
Excitement	0.579		
<b>Negative Emotions (NEmot)</b>		0.819	0.533

Shame	0.797		
Guilt	0.755		
Sadness	0.715		
Discomfort	0.644		
<b>Ethical Decision-Making (EDMaking)</b>		0.860	0.613
Ethical Awareness	0.578		
Ethical Judgment	0.702		
Ethical Intention	0.908		
Ethical Behaviour	0.895		
<b>Positive Post-Decision Emotions (PPEmot)</b>		0.928	0.722
Happiness	0.901		
Accomplishment	0.882		
Satisfaction	0.828		
Pride	0.823		
Confidence	0.810		
<b>Negative Post-Decision Emotions (NPEmot)</b>		0.904	0,655
Discomfort	0.873		
Guilt	0.840		
Shame	0.780		
Remorse	0.776		
Sadness	0.772		
<b>Future Ethical Behavioural Intentions (FBIInt)</b>		0.896	0,812
Ethical Action	0.849		
Ethical Buying	0.950		

Fit statistics for measurement model of 24 indicators for 6 constructs:  $\chi^2_{(233)} = 459,457$ ;  $p=0,000$ ;  $\chi^2/df=1.972$ ; CFI=0.967; TLI=0.961; NFI=0.935; GFI=0.916; RMSEA=0.047.

The proposed structural model and its estimated parameters are shown in Figure 2. All path coefficients are significant and in the proposed direction, thus supporting the research hypotheses. The weights of the relationships between the constructs indicate the strength of the influences between them.

Figure 2: Proposed Structural Model.



The results show that consumers’ positive initial emotions positively influence ethical decision making; while negative emotions at the outset have a negative impact on ethical decisions (Table 3). These results confirm H1 and H2 and support the role of emotions as antecedents of consumer ethics. In addition, the influence of positive emotions on ethical decisions is higher than the influence of negative emotions.

Table 3: Construct Structural Model.

Structural relationships	Hypotheses		Standardized Parameter Estimates		Hypotheses Testing
	Number	Direction	Estimate	t-value (sig.)	
<b>Hypotheses</b>					
Positive Emotions → Ethical Decision-Making	H1	positive	0.378	6.278***	Supported
Negative Emotions → Ethical Decision-Making	H2	negative	-0.299	-5.126***	Supported
Ethical Decision-Making → Positive Post-Decision Emotions	H3	positive	0.604	8.355***	Supported
Ethical Decision-Making → Negative Post-Decision Emotions	H4	negative	-0.631	-8.764***	Supported

Positive Post-Decision Emotions → Future Purchase Intentions	H5	positive	0.381	6.995***	Supported
Negative Post-Decision Emotions → Future Behavioural Intentions	H6	negative	-0.340	-5.906***	Supported

Fit statistics for structural model of 24 indicators for 6 constructs:  $\chi^2_{(239)} = 815,092$ ;  $p=0,000$ ;  $\chi^2/df=3.410$ ; CFI=0.915; TLI=0.902; NFI=0.885; GFI=0.866; RMSEA=0.075.

\*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

The data also show that consumers' ethical decisions exert a positive and significant effect on positive post-decision emotions and a negative impact on negative post-decision emotions, confirming H3 and H4. Finally, the results indicate that positive post-decision emotions positively influence consumers' future ethical behavioural intentions; while negative post-decision emotions negatively influence intentions to behave ethically in the future (confirming H5 and H6).

In a more fine-grained analysis, with regard to the specific emotions that most influence each stage of the consumer ethical decision making process and those most likely to be elicited by the ethical deliberation process, our structural model indicates that the feelings of happiness and gladness are the positive emotions that most influence individual's ethical awareness, judgments, intentions and behaviours; while shame and guilt are the negative emotions that exert the highest impact on each stage of ethical deliberation process (Table 4). In turn, the stage of the ethical decision making process most influenced by consumer emotions (be they positive or negative) is ethical intention, followed by ethical behaviour, judgment and awareness.

**Table 4:** Structural Model Implied Correlations.

Endogenous variables	Exogenous variables				
	Positive Emotions (PEmot)	Happiness	Gladness	Satisfaction	Excitement

<b>Ethical Decision-Making (EDMaking)</b>	0.426	0.390	0.368	0.267	0.203
Ethical Awareness	0.206	0.188	0.178	0.129	0.098
Ethical Judgment	0.303	0.277	0.262	0.190	0.144
Ethical Intention	0.386	0.354	0.334	0.242	0.184
Ethical Behaviour	0.373	0.342	0.323	0.234	0.178

Endogenous variables	Exogenous variables				
	Negative Emotions (PEmot)	Shame	Guilt	Discomfort	Sadness
<b>Ethical Decision-Making (EDMaking)</b>	-0.360	-0.288	-0.271	-0.230	-0.221
Ethical Awareness	-0.173	-0.139	-0.131	-0.111	-0.106
Ethical Judgment	-0.255	-0.204	-0.193	-0.164	-0.157
Ethical Intention	-0.326	-0.261	-0.246	-0.209	-0.200
Ethical Behaviour	-0.315	-0.252	-0.238	-0.202	-0.193

Endogenous variables	Exogenous variables				
	Ethical Decision-Making (EDMaking)	Ethical Awareness	Ethical Judgment	Ethical Intentions	Ethical Behaviours
<b>Positive Post-Decision Emotions (PPEmot)</b>	0.604	0.291	0.429	0.547	0.529
Happiness	0.540	0.260	0.383	0.489	0.473
Accomplishment	0.536	0.258	0.381	0.486	0.470
Pride	0.500	0.241	0.355	0.453	0.438
Satisfaction	0.497	0.240	0.353	0.450	0.436
Confidence	0.487	0.235	0.346	0.441	0.426

<b>Negative Post-Decision Emotions (NPEmot)</b>	-0.631	-0.304	-0.448	-0.571	-0.552
Guilt	-0.594	-0.286	-0.422	-0.538	-0.520
Remorse	-0.527	-0.254	-0.375	-0.478	-0.462
Discomfort	-0.486	-0.234	-0.345	-0.440	-0.425
Shame	-0.445	-0.215	-0.316	-0.404	-0.390
Sadness	-0.420	-0.202	-0.298	-0.380	-0.368

Endogenous variables	Exogenous variables					
	Positive Post-Decision Emotions (PPEmot)	Happiness	Accomplishment	Pride	Satisfaction	Confidence
<b>Future Behavioural Intentions (FBInt)</b>	0.511	0.459	0.453	0.422	0.420	0.411
Ethical Action	0.435	0.391	0.386	0.360	0.358	0.350
Ethical Buying	0.481	0.431	0.427	0.398	0.396	0.388

Endogenous variables	Exogenous variables					
	Negative Post-Decision Emotions (NPEmot)	Guilt	Remorse	Discomfort	Shame	Sadness
<b>Future Behavioural Intentions (FBInt)</b>	-0.485	-0.456	-0.405	-0.373	-0.342	-0.323
Ethical Action	-0.413	-0.389	-0.345	-0.318	-0.292	-0.275
Ethical Buying	-0.457	-0.430	-0.382	-0.352	-0.323	-0.304

Fit statistics for structural model of 24 indicators for 6 constructs:  $\chi^2_{(239)} = 815,092$ ;  $p=0,000$ ;  $\chi^2/df=3.410$ ; CFI=0.915; TLI=0.902; NFI=0.885; GFI=0.866; RMSEA=0.075.

In terms of post-decision emotions, happiness, accomplishment and pride are those most likely to be elicited by the ethical decision making process. In terms of negative post-decision emotions, guilt, remorse and discomfort were the feelings most likely to be stimulated by consumers' unethical decisions.

## 5. Discussion

The goal of this study was to measure the integrated role of emotions, as both antecedents and outcomes, on consumer decision making involving ethical issues. The results of the structural model supported the proposed relationship between initial (pre-decision) emotions, ethical decision making, post-decision emotions and ethical behavioural intentions for the future. Our results showed that positive emotions ("feeling good") positively influenced ethical decisions; whereas negative emotions ("feeling bad") had a negative impact on ethical consumer choices. These findings indicate that emotions, both positive and negative, are significant predictors of consumers' ethical decisions, such that any analysis of consumer ethics disregarding emotions is unlikely to be able to capture the totality of the issue. This outcome corroborates some of the most relevant contributions from social sciences (Agnihotri et al., 2012; Gaudine & Thorne, 2001), psychology (Greene & Haidt, 2002; Haidt, 2007) and neurosciences (Bechara, 2004; Koenigs et al., 2007).

In addition, the influence of positive emotions on the consumer ethical decision making process was higher than the influence of negative emotions. This suggests that public and private actions aimed at promoting ethical behaviours in consumers would do well to try to create positive emotions in consumers, such as happiness, gladness, satisfaction or excitement. The influence of emotions was furthermore most significant in the stages of ethical intentions and ethical behaviours. This is consistent with past cognitive and neurobiological research, which



suggests that the primary role of emotion is motivating morally relevant action (Huebner et al., 2009).

Our results also indicate that consumers who think, decide and act in an ethical manner are more likely to experience positive, rather than negative, emotions (i.e. acting in an ethical manner leads them to “feel good”). By the same token, consumers who make unethical judgments and actions are more likely to experience negative emotions (and less likely to feel positive ones). Because of the significant relationship between ethical decision making and both positive post-decision emotions (positive relationship) and negative post-decision emotions (negative relationship), anticipating these future feelings may exert a substantial influence on individuals’ choices. Thus, our results provide empirical evidence of the integrated role of emotions as antecedents and outcomes of the consumer ethical decision making process, and consistent with previous research (e.g. Mellers & McGraw, 2001) indicate that anticipated emotions can be used to guide consumer decisions, by leading consumers to choose the option providing the greatest expected pleasure (Mellers, Schwartz, & Ritov, 1999) or to avoid the one perceived as generating negative feelings in the future (Escadas et al., 2019b).

In terms of individual emotions, our results assign a central role to happiness, as an antecedent of consumer ethical decision making, as an outcome of this deliberation process, and as the emotion with the most significant relationship with future ethical behavioural intentions. Being happy appears to be the cornerstone of ethical consumer decisions, as a predictor of ethical actions, a consequence that can be anticipated, and a post-decision outcome that will influence future ethically relevant actions.

What constitutes happiness - what it is and how this emotion can be achieved is a discussion beyond the scope of this research; but the evidence presented in this study indicates that it has a key role in consumer ethics, as both a foundation of ethical behaviour and a result thereof;

suggesting it should be promoted by practitioners to encourage ethical sensitivity, ethical choices and ethical behaviours, for the benefit of society as a whole.

## **6. Conclusions and Future Research**

Despite recent advances in the business literature towards the inclusion and examination of the emotional component of ethical decision making (Robertson et al., 2017; Schwartz, 2016; Singh et al., 2018; Zollo, 2020), it has been noted that there is still a need for more empirical research on the integrated and transversal role of emotions, as both antecedents and outcomes of consumers' ethical decision making processes. Moreover, because these emotional mechanisms may influence each stage of the ethical deliberation process in different ways (Huebner et al., 2009), simultaneous and detailed analyses are required to establish the precise point in the consumer ethical decision making process at which emotions have the most significant impact. The current study set out to carry out these analyses – analysing not only pre- but also post-decision emotions; looking at not only positive, but also negative emotions (and which ones bear the greatest impact on decision making); and taking the entire ethical decision making process, and not just a single stage thereof, into account.

Such analyses are not only relevant as a means to increase our understanding of how ethical decisions are formed, but are also of practical consequence, increasing our knowledge of how consumer ethics can be encouraged, and how to plan and adopt effective pro-active approaches to prevent unethical behaviours (Mitchell, Balabanis, Schlegelmilch, & Cornwell, 2009), which can be expected to improve the balance of costs for companies and consumers, and create greater justice and fairness.

The results provide evidence of a transversal role of emotions on ethical consumer decision making. Emotions, both positive and negative, appear significant as both predictors and outcomes of ethical consumer decisions, with the influence of positive emotions being greater

than the influence of negative emotions. Happiness, in particular, was found to be the discrete emotion with the biggest influence on ethical consumer decisions, and a key emotion resulting from ethical decisions and influencing future (ethical) intentions. This suggests an important avenue for future research, in terms of trying to understand how this emotion might be defined, created and sustained.

The data also indicate that the stages of the ethical decision making process most influenced by emotions are ethical intentions and ethical behaviours. Although this may seem somewhat counter-intuitive, it is consistent with previous research, and suggests that perhaps relatively more emphasis should be placed on influencing intentions and behaviours, *vis a vis* recognition or attitudes towards ethical situations.

Finally, the data also seem to suggest the possible existence of a “virtuous ethical cycle” in what pertains to positive emotions and ethical decision making: consumers who think, decide and act ethically are more likely to “feel good” (i.e. experience positive emotions) and these positive post-decision emotions can be expected to positively influence future ethical behavioural intentions. By the same token, our data suggests there may be an “unfavourable ethical cycle”, whereby negative emotions lead to less ethical decisions, leading to more negative emotions, which tend to predict lower ethical intentions. It would be of interest to try to uncover and quantify these relationships in future research, as well as to test a spillover effect (Thøgersen & Ölander, 2003) examining whether specific consumer ethical behaviours spread to other individuals’ ethical behaviours, which, in turn, will change individuals’ general values.

A possible limitation of this current study is bound with the fact pre- and post-decision emotions were measured at the same point of time. Although dictated by practical considerations, future research would do well to test each one of the structural relationships proposed separately, desirably using experimental research designs to do so (Donato & Miceli, 2020).

Reference to and examination of emotions as outcomes of ethical decision making have been relatively limited in the business literature (Zeelenberg, van Dijk, Manstead, & vanr de Pligt, 2000). Since this study demonstrates a significant influence of post-decision emotions on future ethical behavioural intentions, it would be relevant for future research to consider an in-depth analysis of the nature of consumer emotions resulting from decisions involving ethics and how these emotional mechanisms can be expected to influence future ethical choices and actions. In addition, future research should analyse and compare unethical and ethical consumer situations (Vitell & Muncy, 2005), examining and contrasting ethical decision making processes in each as a potentially valuable contribution to our understanding of consumer decisions involving ethics (Brinkmann, 2004).

Finally, it is worth noting that this research was carried out in the region of Braga, in the North of Portugal. Braga is the third largest city in Portugal (Eurostat, 2020) and has recently been considered one of the youngest, most satisfied and happiest cities in Europe (European Commission, 2016). Since our research suggests that happiness is the emotion that most influences consumer ethical decisions and behaviours, future studies should compare different cities and different countries in a cross-cultural perspective to deepen the relationship between happy individuals and ethical consumers.

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## APPENDIX

### Used Scenarios

#### **Scenario 1:** Photocopying book.

James is a Master's student. After the first class of the semester, and when analysing the program of his favourite subject, James verifies that there is a book recommended in the bibliography that covers almost all the matter to be taught. Most of James's colleagues are ordering this book from the library and photocopying it. James decided to do the same.

#### **Scenario 2:** Switching a price tag in a shop, to pay less for a shirt.

On a Saturday, Mary decided to go shopping. She entered a clothing store and "fell in love" with a shirt. However, the price of the shirt was too high for Mary's disposable income. On another shelf, Mary found a shirt of the same colour, with some resemblance to the first, which cost less than half of her favourite shirt. Taking advantage of the high movement in the store, Mary decided to discreetly change the labels with the price of the shirts, getting her favourite shirt for a much lower price.

#### **Scenario 3:** Keeping extra money mistakenly handed by a bank teller.

On a beautiful spring morning, Anthony went to his bank to carry out a bank survey, since he had a family party in this weekend. There were many people at the branch, and the service was rushed by the employee. At the same time, Anthony requested the withdrawal of EUR 200 and the employee proceeded to process the operation. To shorten the time of service, the employee took the money from his box, counted manually, and handed the notes to Anthony.

Already outside the branch, and when checking the amount raised, Anthony verified that he had been delivered EUR 300. Since he was already outside the branch, Anthony decided to go to his car and return home quietly.