

Under Pressure: How Frustration Disrupts Ethical Decision-Making

Hayes, P., Komar, W., Lovett, A., Ochranek, A., Stuart, H., Diegel, K., & Barth T.
Department of Psychology, Texas Christian University

Introduction/Objective:

This study explored how frustration impacts moral and ethical decision-making, focusing on both cognitive and emotional factors. It examined frustration's role in classical (sacrificial) and real-world (contemporary) dilemmas, and how it affects ethical perspectives like Utilitarianism and deontology. The research also analyzed how personality traits, religiosity, socioeconomic status, sex, age, and political orientation influence moral reasoning under frustration.

Method

Participants:

Study 1 Participants: 189 college-aged students; 27 males ($M_{age}=20.04$) and 162 females ($M_{age}=19.42$). The Anagram (frustration) condition had 86 participants; 11 male ($M_{age}=21.18$) and 75 female ($M_{age}=19.56$). The No-Anagram (control) condition had 103 participants; 16 males ($M_{age}=19.25$) and 87 female ($M_{age}=19.30$).

Study 2 Participants: 139 college-aged students; 24 males ($M_{age}=20.17$) and 114 females ($M_{age}=19.94$). The Anagram (frustration) condition had 59 participants with 49 female ($M_{age}=19.51$) and 10 male ($M_{age}=20.6$). The No-Anagram (control) condition had 80 participants with 66 females ($M_{age}=20.37$) and 14 males ($M_{age}=19.74$).

Survey Measures:

- Measures included the Ethical Perspectives Scale as our baseline, the anagrams, eight ethical dilemmas, the ten-item personality inventory, and a demographic questionnaire.

Procedure:

- The participants first took the Ethical Perspectives Scale and were randomly assigned to either the experimental (anagram) condition or the control.
- Participants in the anagram condition were given two minutes to solve 10 anagrams, 4 were unsolvable.
- Next, they responded to ethical dilemmas followed by our personality measure, and lastly the demographic questionnaire.

Results

Utilitarianism in SPI1 is significant across both studies in the No-Anagram condition (Study 1: $\beta = .21$, $t = 2.82$, $p \leq .01$; Study 2: $\beta = .23$, $t = 2.66$, $p \leq .01$). However, once the participants who rate utilitarianism highly become frustrated, the effect disappears (Study 1: $\beta = .04$, $t = .69$, $p \geq .05$; Study 2: $\beta = .02$, $t = .17$, $p \geq .05$).

Rights in CPI3 is significant across both studies in the No-Anagram condition (Study 1: $\beta = .14$, $t = 2.44$, $p \leq .01$; Study 2: $\beta = -.41$, $t = -2.21$, $p \leq .01$). Once frustrated, the effect disappears (Study 1: $\beta = -.03$, $t = -.48$, $p \geq .05$; Study 2: $\beta = -.11$, $t = -1.10$, $p \geq .05$).

Common Good on SPI2 is significant across both studies in the No-Anagram condition (Study 1: $\beta = -.28$, $t = -2.15$, $p \leq .05$; Study 2: $\beta = -.14$, $t = -.96$, $p \geq .05$). Once the participants became frustrated, the effect reinforced their commitment (Study 1: $\beta = -.14$, $t = -.96$, $p \geq .05$; Study 2: $\beta = -.07$, $t = -.86$, $p \geq .05$).

Virtue on SPI1 is significant across both studies in the No-Anagram condition (Study 1: $\beta = .12$, $t = 1.30$, $p \geq .05$; Study 2: $\beta = -.04$, $t = -.28$, $p \geq .05$). Once the participants became frustrated, the effect reinforced their commitment (Study 1: $\beta = -.18$, $t = -2.60$, $p \leq .01$; Study 2: $\beta = -.22$, $t = -2.38$, $p \leq .05$).

Care on SPI1 is significant across both studies in the No-Anagram condition (Study 1: $\beta = .04$, $t = .69$, $p \geq .05$; Study 2: $\beta = -.05$, $t = .59$, $p \geq .05$). Once the participants became frustrated, the effect reinforced their commitment (Study 1: $\beta = -.21$, $t = -2.64$, $p \leq .01$; Study 2: $\beta = -.26$, $t = -2.47$, $p \leq .05$).

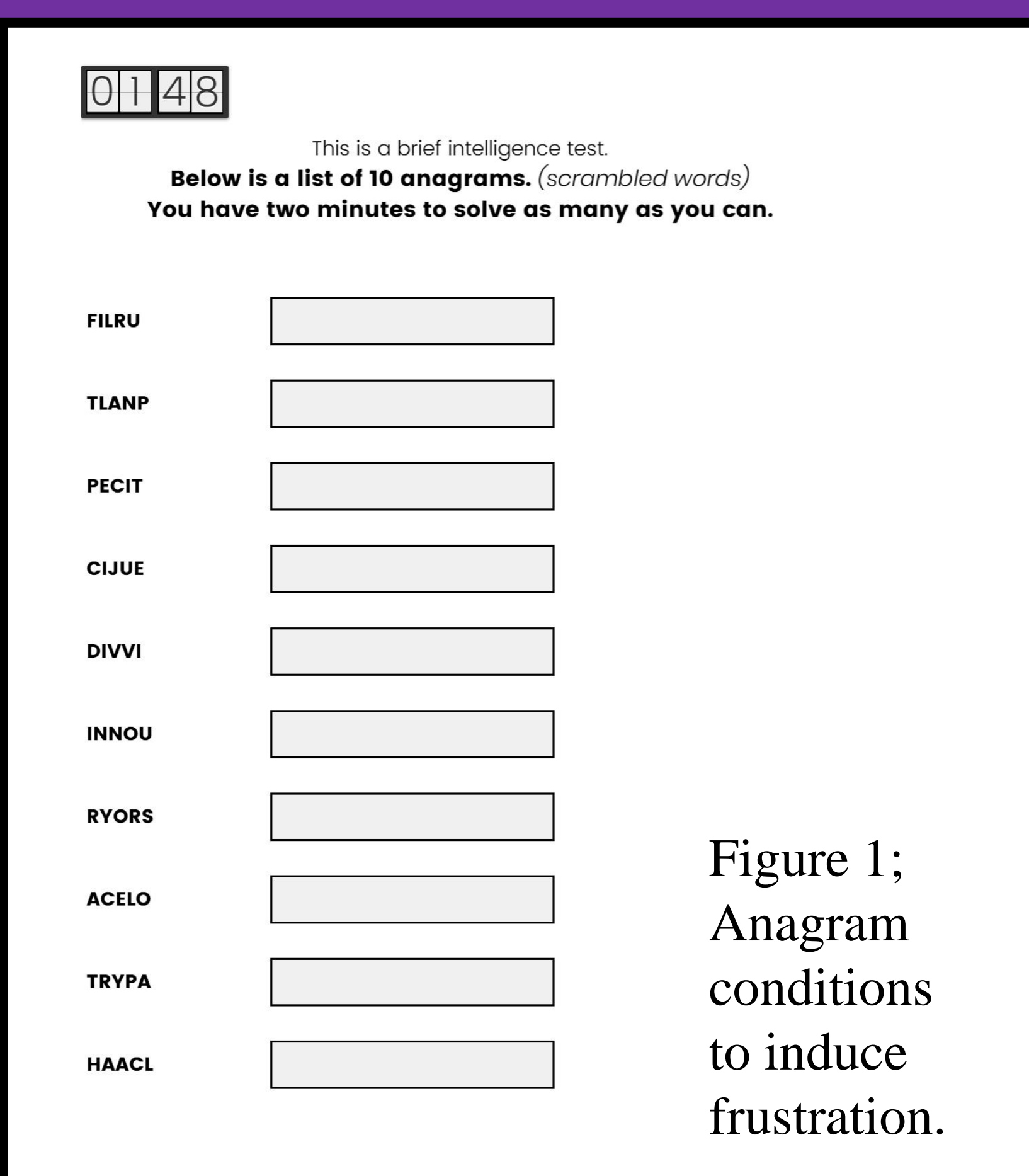


Figure 1;
Anagram
conditions
to induce
frustration.

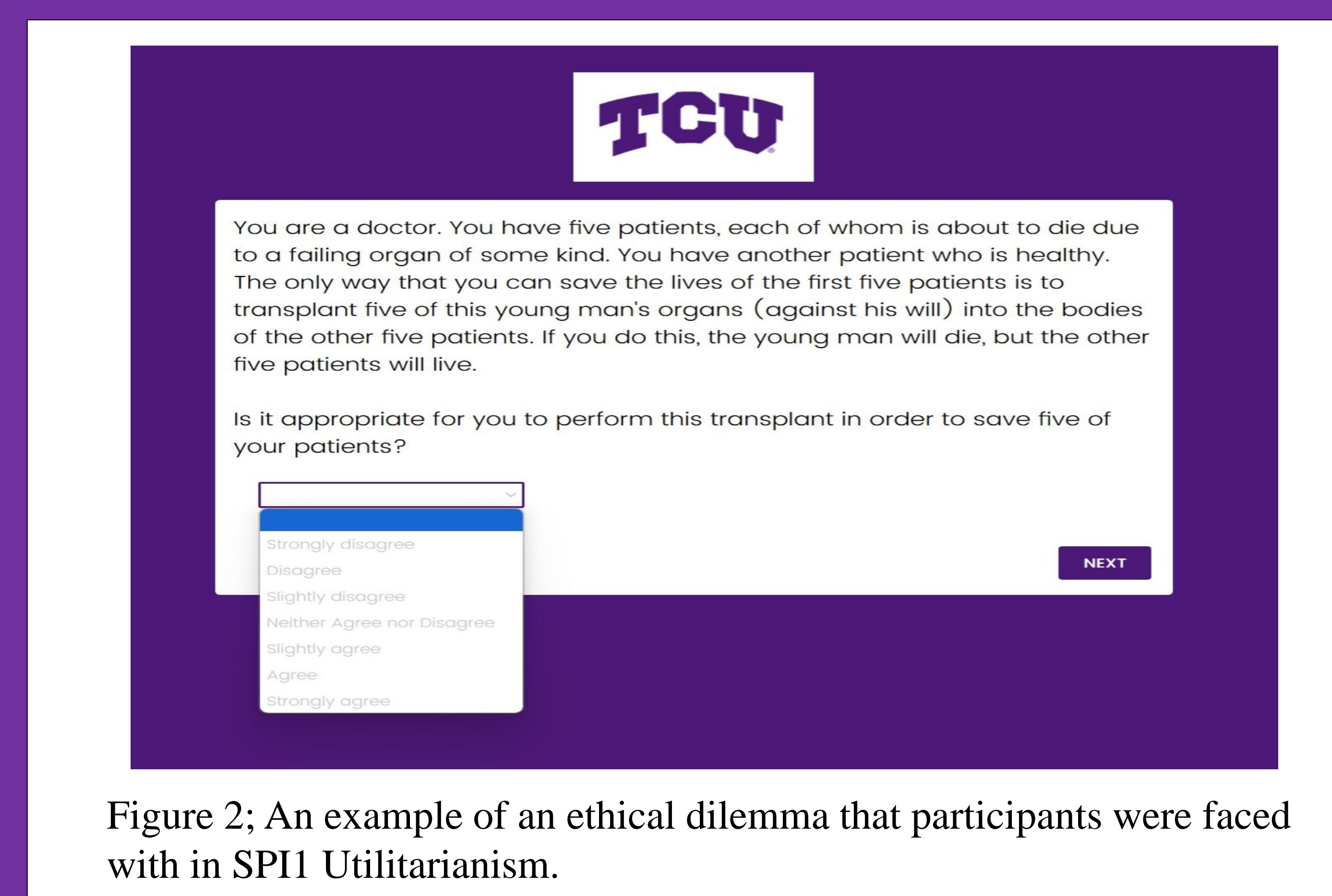


Figure 2; An example of an ethical dilemma that participants were faced with in SPI1 Utilitarianism.

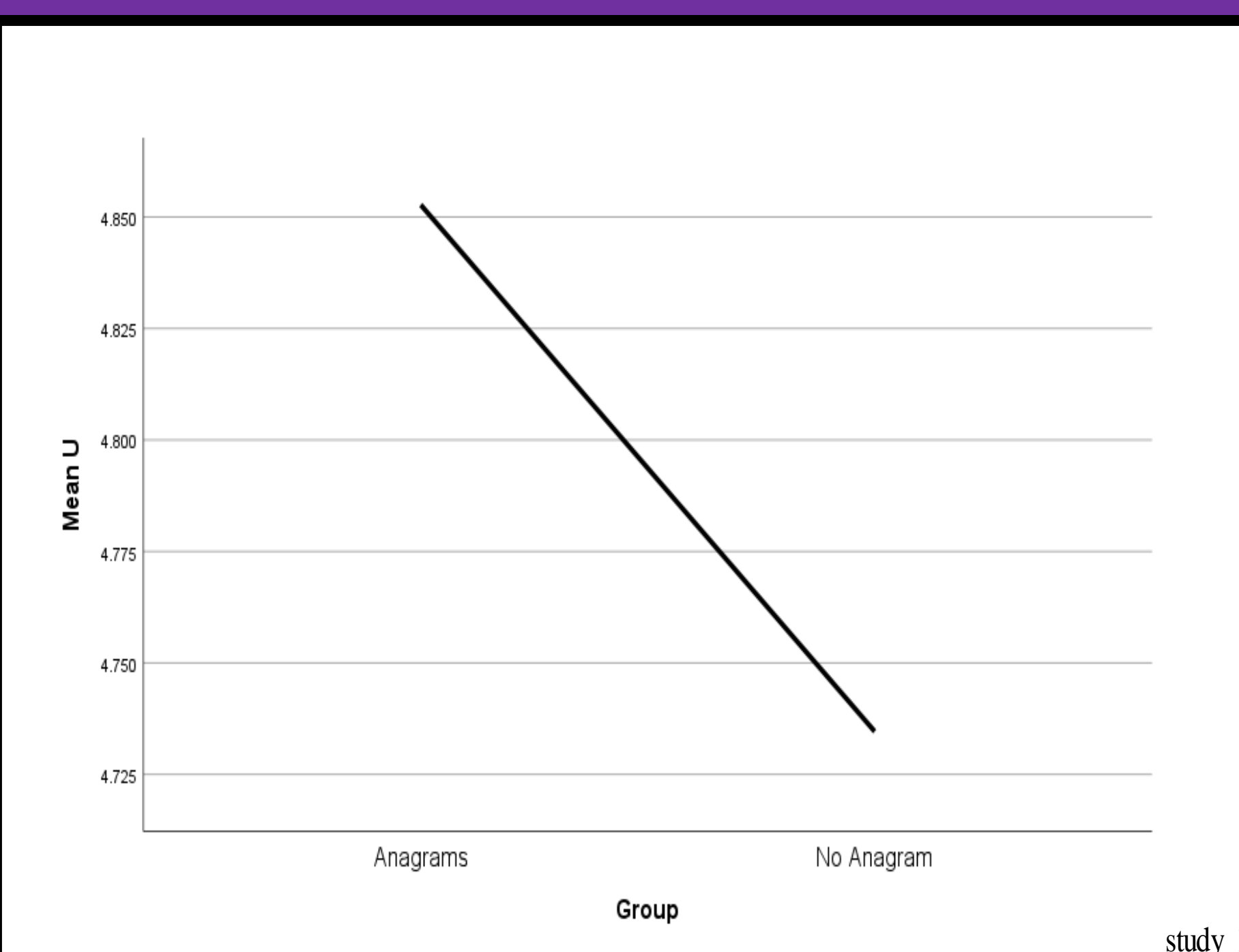


Figure 3; Anagram/Non Anagram/Utilitarianism. SPSS revealed significant difference between the anagram groups in utilitarianism.

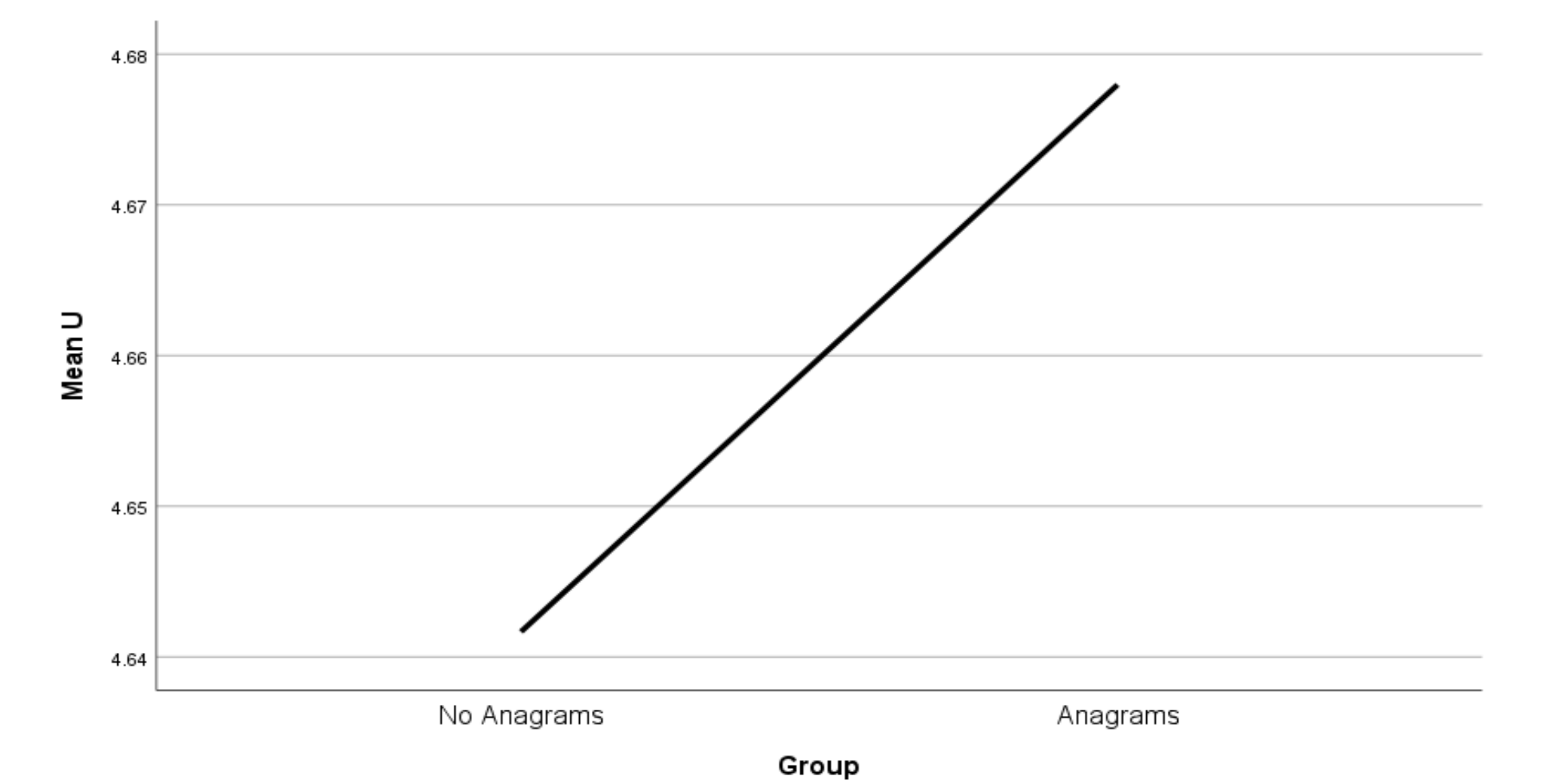


Figure 4; Anagram/Non Anagram/Utilitarianism. SPSS revealed significant difference between the anagram groups in utilitarianism.

Discussion

Limitations

- The participants' mean age was not an accurate representation of the current population. Primarily, college-age students were accounted for.
- Gender: There was a higher number of female participants compared to male participants. Findings are not an accurate representation of ethical decision making of male participants.

Implications

Impact on Leadership and Decision-Making: The findings suggest that frustration can undermine moral consistency, which may affect leaders and decision-makers, especially in high-stress environments like crises or emergency situations.

Policy-Making Considerations: Policymakers could be influenced by emotional factors such as frustration, which may disrupt their ability to make ethically sound decisions.

Ethical Training Programs: The study points to the need for training programs that address the emotional impact on ethical decision-making, ensuring that individuals can make more consistent moral choices under pressure.