

# From Limited Control to Green Empowerment: The Motivational Synergy of Fresh Starts in Predicting Environmental Action

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## Abstract

This study leverages group-based control theory to explore how fresh starts reinvigorate consumers with low motivation to engage in collective environmental efforts. Typically, individuals with low control over their circumstances show less inclination toward collective goals. However, fresh starts can enhance the influence of perceived control on collective environmental engagement, with global identity mediating this relationship. This hypothesis was supported by two empirical studies. The first study analyzed data from 10,430 corporate participants in an energy-saving initiative, revealing that smaller organizations, which likely experience lower levels of control, made substantial energy-saving efforts early in the year, although this effect diminished over time. The second study of 108 college students found that a fresh start mindset and desire for control, mediated by global identity, enhance environmentally responsible behaviors. These findings suggest that fresh starts can effectively connect control perceptions with proactive environmental actions, underscoring their potential to foster collective environmental efforts.

**Keywords:** Fresh start effect, Fresh start mindset, Group-based control, Environmental actions, Energy conservation, Green marketing

## 1. Introduction

As members of local and global societies, consumers are increasingly attuned to pressing environmental issues like climate change and global warming (McCracken 2008; Sheth, Newman, and Gross 1991). These concerns inherently require collective action, necessitating collaborative efforts at both community and individual levels. However, in initiating programs that can effectively translate growing awareness and interest into concrete actions for achieving further societal goals remains a challenge. Notably, there is a gap in empirical research addressing the conditions that foster participation in such collective endeavors (Kalafatis et al. 1999; Paul, Modi, and Patel 2016).

The primary objective of this research is to explore the circumstances under which a particular condition enhances motivation for a certain type of

consumer to participate in environmental initiatives. Drawing from the concepts of group-based control theory (Fritsche 2022), this research proposes that the influence of personal control on collective environmental endeavors will magnify in the context of fresh starts (Dai, Milkman, and Riis 2014, 2015; Price et al. 2018). The hypothesis posits that during moments that evoke a sense of new beginnings, individuals who feel diminished control will exhibit increased involvement in pursuing collective net zero goals as part of a group. However, their participation might gradually decrease over time.

The Fresh Start Effect, empirically demonstrated by Dai, Milkman, and Riis (2014, 2015), indicates that people are more motivated to pursue personal goals around temporal landmarks like New Year's Day or the start of a month, although this motivation often decreases over time. Further, the Fresh Start Mindset (Price et al. 2018), a belief in the ability

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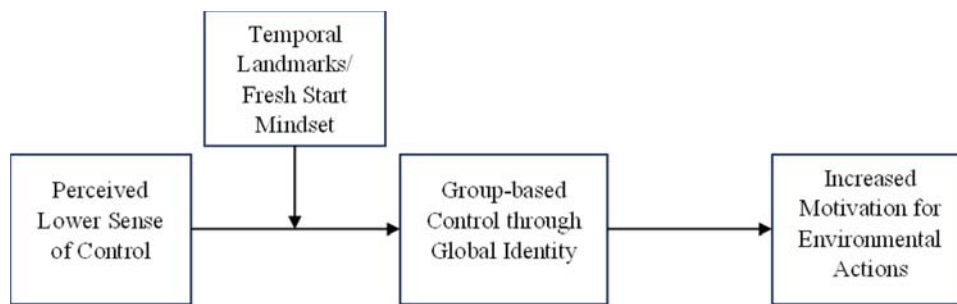


Fig. 1. Theoretical model.

to initiate anew without specific temporal markers, produces a similar effect. The fresh start mindset is associated with a future temporal focus (Karniol and Ross 1996) and globally focused beliefs (Strizhakova, Coulter, and Price 2021). These concepts underscore commonalities with high levels of construal, which Dai, Milkman, and Riis (2015) and Koo et al. (2020) suggest as a mediator of the fresh start effect.

Building on these insights, this study proposes that consumers with low levels of personal control are likely to pursue environmental actions as a collective goal through which they restore a sense of group agency (Fritsche 2022). It suggests that the “fresh start” effect can effectively enhance the motivation of these consumers to engage in social or collective goals. Personal control is defined as the subjective perception that one possesses the ability, resources, or opportunities to change in a desired direction within the environment (Greenberger and Strasser 1986; Thompson 2002). This hypothesis was examined through two empirical studies: Study 1 analyzed open-source archival data on the energy conservation behaviors of 10,430 corporate consumers over one year, focusing on Seoul’s ‘eco-mileage program’—a collective action for greenhouse gas reduction implemented as a part of the environmental policy since 2009. Study 2 surveyed 108 individual consumers on their engagement in environmentally responsible behaviors. These methodologies provide additional evidence from an East Asian context and complement the experimental methods used in many previous studies.

This research contributes to the existing literature in several ways. First, it expands the scope of fresh start literature to the realm of collective actions. While prior research suggests the potential effectiveness of the fresh start effect in social contexts (Dai 2018; Dai, Milkman, and Riis 2015; Koo et al. 2020; Price et al. 2018; Strizhakova, Coulter, and Price 2021), its empirical validation in the specific context of collective actions for societal goals remains largely unexplored.

Second, this study integrates the concepts of the fresh start effect (Dai, Milkman, and Riis 2014,

2015) and the fresh start mindset (Price et al. 2018) with group-based control, as outlined by Fritsche (2022). It proposes that collective actions can restore diminished personal control among consumers experiencing low control, through social agency and identification as members of a global society (Fritsche 2022; Haws, Winterich, and Naylor 2014). This linkage suggests that the fresh start mindset indirectly relates to personal characteristics such as an internal locus of control, which in turn connects to a desire for control (Amoura et al. 2014; Wortman and Brehm 1975).

Finally, this research adopts a moderated mediation model where the fresh start effect motivates consumers with lower control to engage in environmentally conscious actions, anticipating a restoration of group-based control through their global identity (see Fig. 1).

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Fresh start effect and fresh start mindset

The ‘fresh starts effect’ and ‘fresh start mindset’ are critical in understanding how individuals motivated by new beginnings can transform their lives. Empirically, these concepts have shown significant implications for personal goal achievement in contexts such as dieting, saving money, and smoking cessation (Dai, Milkman, and Riis 2014, 2015). The fresh start effect leverages temporal landmarks, promoting a high-level construal of information, which shifts individuals’ focus from day-to-day challenges to broader, long-term goals (Dai 2018; Dai, Milkman, and Riis 2015; Koo et al. 2020).

Beyond individual impacts, the fresh start mindset, which does not rely on specific temporal markers, also motivates people, fostering a global outlook and increased empathy toward others attempting to make significant life changes (Price et al. 2018). The mindset benefits various social groups, from veterans to individuals with past criminal records or mental health challenges (Lee, Yoon, and Joo 2023; Milfeld,

Haley, and Flint 2021). Notably, the fresh start mindset also provokes a global focus, as highlighted by Strizhakova, Coulter, and Price (2021), illustrating its wide applicability and transformative potential in a broader, more inclusive perspective on personal and collective endeavors.

However, the efficacy of fresh starts is not without limitations. Research indicates that successful past behaviors may diminish the perceived need for a fresh start, thereby reducing motivation to continue goal-directed behaviors (Dai 2018; Koo et al. 2020). Additionally, the period immediately before a new beginning, such as the Lunar New Year, often sees a dip in goal-oriented activities, only to increase once the landmark passes (Koo et al. 2020).

While individual decision-making benefits from the fresh start effect are well-documented, its influence on group decision-making for collective/ societal goals is less understood. Initial findings suggest that the psychological shift induced by fresh starts could enhance collective action, especially in contexts marked by uncertainty and limited control. These insights imply that fresh starts might not only rejuvenate individual endeavors but also catalyze collective efforts toward societal improvements.

This research extends the scope of the fresh start effect from individuals to collective settings, hypothesizing that its principles could play a crucial role in facilitating societal change. By understanding how these concepts impact both individual and group dynamics, particularly through the global lens provoked by the fresh start mindset (Strizhakova, Coulter, and Price 2021), we can better harness their potential to address and achieve broader societal challenges.

## 2.2. Personal control and group-based control

Being a fundamental human motivation, personal control is defined as the belief that one can effectively regulate one's situations to attain desired outcomes or avoid adverse consequences (Burger and Cooper 1979). When external factors threaten or diminish this sense of control, a natural and initial response is to seek restoration (Wortman and Brehm 1975). Literature identifies two strategies for restoring control; primary and secondary control (Rothbaum, Weisz, and Snyder 1982). Primary control involves a more immediate and direct response to threats, aiming to restore control through personal agency (i.e., reactance theory; Miron and Brehm 2006). Recently, the group-based control theory (Fritsche 2022) has proposed that primary control can also be sought by groups through a social agency, based on the social identity approach (Reicher, Spears, and Haslam 2010; Tajfel and Turner 2004). This theory suggests that in-

dividuals strive to regain their sense of control by cultivating the belief that they can exert influence over situations through two types of autonomous selves; as an individual agent (e.g., as "I") or as collective agents (e.g., as social self "We") through identification with self-defining in-groups. However, if efforts to restore primary control fail, individuals may resort to secondary control, which involves coping with situations or seeking compensatory control to regain their sense of control (for a comprehensive review of compensatory control theory, see Cutright and Wu 2023; Kay et al. 2008).

Research on compensatory control has shown that psychological and spatial boundaries can serve as compensatory mechanisms for individuals experiencing low perceived control. These boundaries help mitigate attentional overload by simplifying the environment (Cutright 2012). Similarly, metaphorical actions that establish boundaries between chosen and forgone options, such as closing a lid or turning a page, focus attention on the selected option and increase satisfaction (Gu, Botti, and Faro 2013). More direct evidence was found during the COVID-19 pandemic, where partitioning experiential consumption increased the sense of control and subjective well-being, particularly for those experiencing high financial anxiety (Cho et al. 2023). Fresh starts also contribute to creating psychological boundaries that symbolize new beginnings, such as moving or cleaning a room, which can act as spatial demarcations (Dai, Milkman, and Riis 2015, Study 4). Building on this, it is conceivable that spatial and temporal boundaries established by the temporal landmarks and fresh start mindsets could play a role in compensatory control, helping individuals cope with perceived deficiencies in control over their environment.

Most societal goals, such as addressing climate change, necessitate collective actions. A collective goal is a desired outcome that individuals strive to achieve collaboratively as part of a group (Kim et al. 2024). The success of a collective goal largely depends on individual efforts and their decisions to participate in these actions. By doing so, individuals exercise group-based control as social agents, tackling challenges like climate change. This dynamic aligns with the social identity theory framework (Tajfel and Turner 2004), which posits that self-concept includes personal identity and social identity. While personal identity pertains to self-perception as an individual entity, social identity concerns how individuals see themselves as members of social groups. Given that social identity is tied to social goals, it naturally relates to high construals of the self-concept, potentially triggered by fresh starts. This connection suggests that activating a highly construed social identity can

motivate individuals to pursue a psychologically distant societal goal, thereby restoring their diminished sense of control.

### 2.3. Hypothesis development

The hypotheses were developed to answer two research questions. The first question asks whether the fresh start effect is beneficial to those who feel less control over the environment and, hence less motivated to act. The second question inquires, if so, what mechanism would explain the benefit of a fresh start for the low control who might be less motivated to engage in social goals. The investigation of these questions suggests that fresh starts could be beneficial to encourage aspirations for societal goals among consumers feeling less control because they could anticipate restoring their control through achieving societal goals.

First, this study examines whether the fresh start effect, known to increase aspirational behavior at the individual level, is also effective for social goal-seeking behavior. Since the pursuit of a societal or common goal is distantly construed over personal goals, the idea of fresh starts is expected to be effective in motivation due to the construal fit (Lee, Keller, and Sternthal 2010). Societal goals often encompass broader and more complex contexts and outcomes, which are typically perceived as more distant compared to personal goals that are more immediate and concrete (Trope and Liberman 2010). For example, Eyal, Liberman, and Trope (2008) demonstrate that actions taken on behalf of a group or community, which often have less direct personal outcomes, involve higher-level construals. A similar empirical relationship is found in the context of delivering motivational messages by organizational leaders. Berson et al. (2015) proposed and demonstrated that messages delivered from a greater psychological distance, such as societal or organizational visions which generally require considerations of the broader community or long-term impacts, tend to resonate more when the audience is also perceived to be distant. These findings align with societal goals, which often encompass broader and less immediate outcomes compared to personal objectives, fitting to a high level of construals. By promoting a high level of construal, the thought of fresh starts can be an effective tool for motivating individuals who feel a low sense of control, especially when they engage in addressing societal problems such as climate change, plastic waste reduction, etc.

**H1.** *The fresh start effect will moderate the positive impact of situational control on engagement in societally goal-*

*congruent behaviors. Specifically, the concept of a fresh start will increase intentions to participate in societal goal-congruent behaviors more among individuals with a lower sense of control than those with a higher sense of control.*

The next hypothesis explores the underlying mechanisms through which fresh starts are likely to motivate individuals with low feelings of control. Dai, Milkman, and Riis (2015) and Koo et al. (2020) demonstrated that the fresh start effect, which divides events into periods before and after temporal landmarks symbolizing a new beginning, motivates individuals by psychologically separating their past and present selves from their future selves. This concept aligns with Dai (2018) empirical evidence that temporal demarcation leads to higher-level information processing. The past self, being psychologically closer and more detailed due to experienced events, contrasts with the psychologically distant and idealized future self, as noted by Shang, Pang, and Liu (2020).

Drawing from social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1986), individuals construct their identities along two dimensions: global and local (Alden, Steenkamp, and Batra 2006; Holton 2000; Steenkamp and De Jong 2010). Global identity involves viewing oneself as a member of a worldwide community, closely connected to global lifestyles, cultures, and practices (Arnett 2002; Chiu et al. 2011), while local identity centers on local traditions and customs (Holton 2000). Notably, possessing a global identity corresponds to a higher construal level and is linked to the fresh start mindset (Strizhakova, Coulter, and Price 2021). Strizhakova, Coulter, and Price (2021) found that individuals with a fresh start mindset are more likely to adopt a global identity, seeing themselves as global citizens and part of a larger world community. This global identity aligns individuals with global values, such as environmental sustainability, and their study details how global identity and environmental consciousness are interconnected, both being enhanced by a fresh start mindset. Their work emphasizes the importance of psychological frameworks in understanding consumer behavior in a globalized world and highlights the role of individual agency in addressing global challenges through personal and collective actions.

In this context, the concept of fresh starts might be more effective in motivating individuals with lower feelings of control because it helps them perceive themselves as global citizens, hence fostering a connection with others as a group and emphasizing global values like environmental awareness. Experiencing low control often leads to demotivation in volitional behaviors (Ajzen 1991). Since low control is a negative experience, people seek ways to restore

their control in a sequential process (Fritsche 2022; Kay et al. 2008; Rothbaum, Weisz, and Snyder 1982). Initially, they try to restore control through personal agency, also known as primary control. If primary control fails, they seek restoration through social agents, known as group-based control. If group-based control fails, secondary and/or compensatory control comes into play. However, the concept of a fresh start may trigger the formation of a global identity based on a high construal level. When individuals perceive themselves as part of a global society, this global identity fosters thinking about desirable outcomes rather than the feasibility of achieving societal goals. This perception of global identity could explain the process through which individuals with low feelings of control engage in environmental actions to achieve societal goals as group members. This prediction also aligns with the group-based control theory suggested by Fritsche (2022). Hence, the hypothesis was developed as follows:

**H2.** *The concept of a fresh start would moderate the relationship between feelings of control and environmental consciousness. Specifically, a stronger fresh start mindset would intensify the negative association between feelings of control and environmental consciousness. Moreover, this relationship would be mediated by global identity.*

### 3. Study overview

Two studies investigate how and why the fresh start effect is beneficial to those who feel a low level of personal control. Study 1 aims to extend the applicability of the fresh start effect from the context of individual goal-seeking behavior to that of collective action for social goal pursuit (Hypothesis 1). To fulfill its objectives, Study 1 examines the relationship between personal control and the fresh start effect within the context of social goal achievement. This investigation will be through utilizing publicly available data from the “Eco Mileage System,” a program implemented to encourage citizen participation in reducing greenhouse gas emissions in Seoul, South Korea (more information about the program is available on the Smart Seoul Data of Things website: <https://seoulsolution.kr/en/content/eco-mileage-system-1>).<sup>1</sup> The public data relies on an open API provided by the Seoul

Metropolitan Government through the Seoul Open Data Plaza (<https://data.seoul.go.kr/#>).

## 4. Study 1

### 4.1. Data

The data provides detailed reports on the energy consumed by registered members in each Seoul administrative region (dong). The datasets, available on the Public Data Repository (<http://data.seoul.go.kr/dataList/OA-15360/S/1/datasetView.do>), include information on registered members’ energy consumption, including electricity and carbon emissions, since 2019. Among the membership classifications, two categories of business members—corporations and small businesses—are suitable to exemplify high and low levels of control, respectively. Employees in small-sized enterprises often face a distinct set of challenges that diminish their sense of control. These challenges include limited access to financial and human resources, which are frequently stretched thin across essential operations. Additionally, small businesses typically possess less authority in their market niche, which can impede their ability to influence market conditions or secure favorable business terms. They also face higher uncertainty, not only due to market dynamics but also because of less predictable cash flows and customer bases, which are often narrower than those of larger corporations. For this study, I retrieved datasets encapsulating the energy usage information of 10,430 business members from January to December 2021.

### 4.2. Variables

#### 4.2.1. Dependent variables

The analysis incorporated two dependent variables to clarify the impact of fresh starts on monthly consumption changes between two distinct business groups: companies and small businesses. The two dependent variables are: 1) the rate of change in each member’s monthly consumption compared to the same month in the previous year, and 2) the rate of change in each member’s consumption compared to the monthly average energy use of all members in the current year. We anticipate that the interaction effect between levels of control and the introduction of fresh

<sup>1</sup> The Eco Mileage System, as an initiative in sustainable urban living, was launched by the Seoul Metropolitan Government to incentivize eco-friendly behaviors among its residents and businesses. This program rewards both individuals and businesses for adopting environmentally responsible practices in their daily lives. Participants in the Eco Mileage System, categorized as individuals and businesses, can earn “mileage points” by engaging in various eco-conscious activities, such as reducing energy consumption, using public transportation, recycling, and conserving water. These accumulated points can then be redeemed for a wide range of benefits. These benefits include discounts on utilities, recognition as environmentally responsible members, access to cultural events, and exclusive incentives and services. The Eco Mileage System not only promotes eco-awareness but also contributes to the well-being of both participants and the environment, making it a valuable initiative for fostering sustainable urban living.

starts will manifest in a similar pattern across different energy categories: electricity and total carbon energy.

Annual energy consumption naturally exhibits monthly endogenous variations. It hypothesizes that the fresh start effect, occurring at the symbolic commencement of a new period, will influence dependent variables in distinct ways. Energy-saving behaviors will be particularly marked in the metric of the monthly variations, demoting the year-on-year rate of change. However, when anchoring the analysis on the current year's energy use, the "fresh start" effect might not be as perceptible in metrics comparing consumption to the average monthly rate of change for that year.

#### 4.2.2. Predictor and control variables

This study has two predictor variables: fresh start landmarks and levels of personal control. According to Dai, Milkman, and Riis (2014), the fresh start landmarks predictor measurement is by month, day, and weekday. Month is a continuous variable from "1" (January) to "12" (December). Day is also a continuous variable indicating how many days have passed since the start of the month at the time of registration. However, the dataset registrations were once a month (i.e., all monthly information has the same registration date), typically occurring early in the month with a minimum value of 1 and a maximum value of 12. Therefore, this study expected day not to be a very deterministic measure as a temporal landmark. According to the registration date, the day of the week using the 2021 calendar was added. Since the data includes business members, this study expected lower energy usage on weekends compared to working days. Consequently, Sunday was coded as 0, Monday as 1, and continuing up to Saturday as 6. Finally, a dichotomous scale was added as a control variable to observe differences in energy use between weekends/holidays (coded as "0") and weekdays (coded as "1").

This study operationalized the level of personal control by the size of businesses, classifying them as either corporations or small businesses, and used this classification as the second predictor variable. Corporations are coded as "+1" to represent a high level of control, as employees in these larger organizations typically have access to ample resources, robust hierarchical structures, and clear procedural guidelines, which collectively enhance their perceived control over outcomes. In contrast, small businesses are coded as "-1" to indicate a low level of control. Employees in small-sized enterprises often face a distinct set of challenges that diminish their sense of control. These challenges include limited resources,

negotiating power, and reduced economies of scale. shared among group members, less authority, and face higher uncertainty. Moreover, their agility, while often seen as a strength, can also lead to unpredictability in roles and responsibilities, further contributing to a lower sense of control among employees. Finally, the population per km<sup>2</sup> in an administrative region (dong) of Seoul was added as a control variable since social crowdedness often manifests levels of personal control (e.g., Maeng, Tanner, and Soman 2013).

#### 4.3. Results

Study 1 utilized a comprehensive dataset consisting of 10,430 energy consumption records for 2021. This dataset delineated monthly consumption patterns—January (= 1) through December (= 12)—for electricity and carbon energy usage by registered entities, including companies (= +1) and small businesses (= -1). These organizations covered 426 administrative sub-regions (dongs) under the jurisdiction of 25 main districts (Gu) in Seoul. The analytical model treated the change in energy consumption as the dependent variable, while temporal starting points, level of control, and their interaction were independent variables. Control variables incorporated into the model were a binary variable distinguishing weekdays (= 1) from weekends (= 0) and a continuous variable representing regional density (person/km<sup>2</sup>).

Table 1 shows the results of two units of analysis: the year-on-year comparison and the average amounts of energy consumption for different types of energy. A.1 represents electricity usage, and A.2 represents carbon emissions. The positive sign indicates an increase, and the negative sign indicates a decrease in this year's energy consumption compared to last year and the average of this year.

##### 4.3.1. Electricity usage

A.1 presents the outcomes of an analysis focused on the percentage change in electricity usage. After excluding missing values, the dataset retains varying numbers of values for the analysis with each of the two dependent variables: year-on-year percentage change (n = 9,820; corporations (high control) = 50.01% vs. small businesses (low control) = 49.99%) and average comparison variation (n = 9,883; corporations (high control) = 50.22% vs. small businesses (low control) = 49.78%). Initially, to replicate the anticipated impact of fresh starts on the alternations in year-on-year electricity consumption as the dependent variable, the model incorporated temporal landmarks signaling fresh starts, month, day of the month, day of the week, business type to represent the control level, and the interaction between month and

Table 1. Regression analysis results for each type of energy usage (Study 1).

Predictors	A.1		A.2	
	Electricity		Carbon emission	
	Year-on-year (%)	Annual average (%)	Year-on-year (%)	Annual average (%)
Control x Month	-0.19** (0.06)	-0.08 <sup>†</sup> (0.05)	-0.16* (0.07)	-0.06 <sup>NS</sup> (0.06)
Control Level: Corp. (high) = 1, SB (low) = -1	1.86*** (0.48)	0.86* (0.37)	1.59** (0.55)	0.77 <sup>†</sup> (0.44)
Month: January = 1; December = 12	0.59*** (0.07)	0.45*** (0.05)	0.67*** (0.08)	0.55*** (0.06)
Day: Min = 1; Max = 31	0.22** (0.07)	0.09 <sup>†</sup> (0.06)	0.23** (0.08)	0.08 <sup>NS</sup> (0.06)
Weekday: Sun = 0, Mon = 1; Sat = 6	0.60*** (0.11)	0.57*** (0.09)	0.63*** (0.13)	0.57*** (0.10)
Weekdays = 1: Weekend/Holiday = 0	1.78** (0.57)	0.08 <sup>NS</sup> (0.45)	1.52* (0.66)	0.09 <sup>NS</sup> (0.53)
Density (person/km <sup>2</sup> )	0.00 <sup>NS</sup> (0.00)	0.00* (0.00)	0.00 <sup>NS</sup> (0.00)	0.00* (0.00)
N	9,820	9,883	9,875	9,927
F	17.52***	17.23***	11.86***	15.48***
R <sup>2</sup>	0.012	0.012	0.011	0.011

Note. Corp. = Corporations, SB = Small businesses; Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. <sup>†</sup> $p < 0.10$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

control level, along with control variables of regional population density and a binary variable of weekday vs. weekend, as aligned with the literature.

The regression analysis confirmed a significant electricity conservation effect linked to temporal landmarks, including January, the first day of the month, and the beginning of the workweek (Monday), each symbolizing a new starting point ( $\beta = 0.59$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ,  $t = 8.92$ ,  $p < .001$  for month;  $\beta = 0.22$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ,  $t = 3.05$ ,  $p = .002$  for day of the month;  $\beta = 0.22$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ,  $t = 3.05$ ,  $p < .01$  for workweek day). These findings illustrate that electricity consumption among members was lowest during January, the first day of the month, and the first workweek day (Monday), followed by a subsequent linear increase over the year, month, and workweek. This pattern remains statistically significant even after accounting for national holidays, consistent with the findings of Dai, Milkman, and Riis (2014).

To explore the impact of the feeling of control on year-on-year electricity conservation, the model incorporated the binary company type variable (corporations as high control = 1; small businesses as low control = -1) as a predictor. Also, it controlled for social crowding measured by district population density, a factor related to control levels (Hui and Bateson 1991; Maeng, Tanner, and Soman 2013). The results revealed that small businesses with low control were more likely to conserve electricity than corporations with high control ( $\beta = 1.86$ ,  $SE = 0.48$ ,  $t = 3.91$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This effect retained its significance even after controlling for social crowding, which yielded non-significant results ( $\beta = 0.00$ ,  $SE = 0.00$ ,  $t = -0.40$ ,  $p = .69$ ). Most importantly, the moderating effect also maintained significance for the percentage changes in year-on-year electricity consumption ( $\beta = -0.19$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $t = -2.95$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

Analyzing this through Hayes (2018) Process Model 1, the difference in energy conservation between small businesses and corporations was significant during earlier months of the year, such as February (one SD below the mid-year;  $\beta = 1.48$ ,  $SE = 0.37$ ,  $t = 4.04$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and July, the mid-year ( $\beta = 0.72$ ,  $SE = 0.23$ ,  $t = 3.17$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Notably, the magnitude of this effect diminished as the months progressed. By November (one SD above the mid-year), the disparity in electricity consumption between small businesses and corporations became insignificant ( $\beta = -0.24$ ,  $SE = 0.37$ ,  $t = -0.66$ ,  $p = 0.51$ ), supporting this study's hypotheses.

The observed fresh start pattern also emerged in another dependent variable: percentage deviation from the current year's average electricity consumption ( $n = 9,883$ ; corporations (high control) = 50.22% vs. small businesses (low control) = 49.78%). Notably, the analysis found significant results for the month ( $\beta = 0.45$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ,  $t = 8.84$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and the day of the workweek ( $\beta = 0.57$ ,  $SE = 0.09$ ,  $t = 6.52$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Also, the day of the month exhibited a marginally significant impact on the percentage deviation from the average electricity usage among members within the same year ( $\beta = 0.09$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $t = 1.70$ ,  $p = .09$ ). This finding lends support to the notion that the perception of embarking on a new beginning, prompted by temporal landmarks, serves as a motivating factor for individuals to pursue social goals, such as energy conservation.

These outcomes suggest that the percentage deviation from the average electricity consumption among members was notably lowest in January and Mondays compared to the average annual and weekly spending among members. Subsequently, a linear increase in energy consumption became apparent as time progressed. The model also assessed the

influence of the feeling of control on energy consumption deviation from the average while controlling for the district population density. The findings revealed that small businesses with a lower sense of control exhibited a greater tendency to conserve electricity compared to the current year's average, in contrast to corporations with a high sense of control ( $\beta = 0.86$ ,  $SE = 0.37$ ,  $t = 2.32$ ,  $p = .02$ ). This effect remained significant even after accounting for the influence of population density, which directly impacted the percentage deviation from the average. However, the impact was negligible, as indicated by its near-zero coefficient ( $\beta = 0.00$ ,  $SE = 0.00$ ,  $t = 2.68$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

Importantly, the moderating effect showed marginal significance at the 90% confidence level for the percentage deviation from the average energy consumption of the year ( $\beta = -0.08$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ,  $t = -1.656$ ,  $p < .10$ ). Analysis employing Hayes (2018) Process Model 1 uncovered that small-sized businesses with a lower sense of control conserved significantly more energy than corporations with a higher sense of control. This distinction was notable in earlier months of the year, such as February (one SD below the mid-year;  $\beta = 0.69$ ,  $SE = 0.28$ ,  $t = 2.42$ ,  $p = .02$ ) and June, the mid-year ( $\beta = 0.36$ ,  $SE = 0.18$ ,  $t = 2.04$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Nevertheless, the difference in percentage deviation between small businesses and corporations from the average of the year became statistically insignificant in November, one SD above the mid-year ( $\beta = -0.06$ ,  $SE = 0.29$ ,  $t = -0.21$ ,  $p = 0.83$ ). These findings provide additional robust support for the hypotheses.

#### 4.3.2. Carbon emissions

A similar procedure of analysis examined the effect on members' carbon consumption. Column A.2 in Table 1 presents the outcomes, highlighting the analysis results for carbon consumption with two distinct dependent variables. Upon removing missing values, the dataset maintained 9,876 businesses (corporations/high control = 50.14% vs. small businesses/low control = 49.86%) for year-on-year percentage change and 9,928 businesses (corporations/high control = 50.04% vs. small businesses/low control = 49.96%) for average comparison variation.

In the initial stage, the regression analysis results for the year-on-year carbon consumption growth rate unveiled a significant effect attributed to temporal landmarks such as the month, day of the month, and workweek day. These temporal points each symbolized a fresh start ( $\beta = 0.67$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ ,  $t = 8.80$ ,  $p < .001$  for month;  $\beta = 0.23$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ ,  $t = 2.77$ ,  $p < .01$  for day of the month;  $\beta = 0.63$ ,  $SE = 0.13$ ,  $t = 4.87$ ,  $p < .001$  for workweek day). These findings aligned with the pre-

vious analysis results, affirming the pronounced fresh start effect in driving social goals such as reducing carbon consumption. This observed pattern retained its statistical significance even after including national holidays as control variables, consistent with the findings of Dai, Milkman, and Riis (2014).

In the context of the influence of control levels on the year-on-year percentage change in carbon consumption, it was evident that small businesses characterized by a diminished sense of control exhibited a higher likelihood of conserving carbon consumption compared to corporations demonstrating a stronger sense of control ( $\beta = 1.59$ ,  $SE = 0.55$ ,  $t = 2.90$ ,  $p = .004$ ). The variable of population density, representing social crowding, did not yield a direct impact ( $\beta = 0.00$ ,  $SE = 0.00$ ,  $t = -0.82$ ,  $p = .41$ ). Notably, the moderating fresh start effect remained statistically significant for year-on-year carbon consumption percentage changes ( $\beta = -0.16$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ,  $t = -2.14$ ,  $p = .03$ ).

Hayes (2018) Process Model 1 revealed a significant disparity in carbon consumption patterns between small businesses and corporations during the earlier months of the year. For instance, at the start of the year in February (one SD below the mid-year), the difference was evident, with small businesses showing a substantial decrease in carbon consumption compared to corporations ( $\beta = 1.27$ ,  $SE = 0.42$ ,  $t = 3.00$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ). Similarly, during June, the mid-year, this difference persisted ( $\beta = 0.62$ ,  $SE = 0.26$ ,  $t = 2.39$ ,  $p = .02$ ). However, intriguingly, this contrast in energy consumption patterns between small businesses and corporations diminished by November (one SD above the mid-year and near the end of the year), rendering the difference statistically insignificant ( $\beta = -0.19$ ,  $SE = 0.42$ ,  $t = -0.44$ ,  $p = 0.66$ ). This outcome illustrates three key points: first, a significant distinction in carbon consumption between small businesses and corporations was evident at the onset of the year; second, as the year unfolded, small businesses and corporations exhibited an overall increase in their rates of carbon consumption; and third, by the end of the year, the initial disparity had become statistically insignificant.

The observed fresh start pattern also manifested in the regression analysis for the percentage change compared to the average carbon consumption. Remarkably, there were statistically significant outcomes for the month ( $\beta = 0.55$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $t = 8.96$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and the workday of the week ( $\beta = 0.57$ ,  $SE = 0.10$ ,  $t = 5.44$ ,  $p < .001$ ). However, the day of the month did not substantially impact the percentage change relative to the average carbon consumption ( $\beta = 0.08$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ,  $t = 1.21$ ,  $p = .23$ ); the likely attribution stems



from the dataset's systematic monthly registration of records. This observation was consistent with other types of energy as well.

In line with other energy types, the percentage changes compared to the average carbon consumption among members exhibited reduced consumption during the earlier months of the year and early weekdays, followed by a subsequent increase as time advanced. The model also evaluated the impact of members' sense of control on their carbon spending percentage change while controlling for district population density. The results indicated a marginally significant difference in carbon consumption ( $\beta = 0.77$ ,  $SE = 0.44$ ,  $t = 1.75$ ,  $p = .08$ ), suggesting that small businesses with a lower sense of control consumed less carbon, while corporations with a high sense of control utilized more carbon energy. The moderation effect was also not statistically significant ( $\beta = -0.06$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $t = -1.05$ ,  $p = .29$ ).

These findings were consistent with electricity consumption. This distinct temporal separation from the past, suggested by Koo et al. (2020), contributes to the observed significant impact. Furthermore, this fresh start effect appears more pronounced for small businesses than corporations.

#### 4.4. Discussion

The results of Study 1 provided general support for the role of temporal landmarks in moderating the association between diminished sense of control and environmental actions. The findings revealed heightened energy conservation behaviors among small businesses when temporal markers indicated a new beginning. The fresh start effect was prevalent in year-over-year energy consumption but less prominent when comparing energy consumption percentage changes to the same year's monthly average. This reduced significance may be because comparing to the monthly average in the same year does not signify a new beginning. Furthermore, the fresh start effect was not significant for the day landmark, probably due to the batch registration system. This batching process may have contributed to reduced variability in the data. In other words, the grouping of records and their monthly entry into the system could have limited the differentiation of day-of-the-month effects on the changes in percentage from the average energy consumption of the year, which plays a crucial role in the manifestation of the fresh start effect (Dai, Milkman, and Riis 2014, 2015; Koo et al. 2020; Price et al. 2018). Notably, this motivational impact exhibited greater strength among small-sized business members than large businesses.

This field study utilizing archival data spanning various energy conservation behaviors possesses notable advantages, such as enhancing external validity and alleviating potential concerns for social desirability bias. While the results support hypothesis 1, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations. First, the study employed the size of businesses as a proxy variable for the levels of control, raising questions about validity. This approach could be controversial due to the potential correlation between a group's energy expenditure and the total number of employees. It is conceivable that small-sized businesses, including only a limited number of employees or even the owner, might have fewer energy demands compared to large-sized businesses with a larger workforce. This organizational difference could have inadvertently led to an elevated energy consumption for large-sized companies, irrespective of their perceived level of control.

Furthermore, the results of Study 1 did not offer any insights into the underlying reasons why temporal landmarks signifying fresh starts motivated business participants with low levels of control. It may not be the experience of group agency and group-based control provided by the fresh starts, but rather a general self-reliance (Ilgen and Pulakos 1999) or self-efficacy (Gecas 1989).

## 5. Study 2

Study 2 differs from Study 1 in two ways. First, individual participants, rather than businesses, were recruited for a survey. In this way, it directly measured the primary variables of interest, rather than relying on proxy variables. Second, Study 2 delved into the theoretical foundations of the fresh start effect as a form of group-based control. Drawing upon the social identity approach (Reicher, Spears, and Haslam 2010; Tajfel and Turner 2004) and group-based control theory (Fritzsche 2022), global identity induced by the fresh start mindset might play a group agency role as a member of a worldwide community (Ng and Basu 2019; Strizhakova and Coulter 2013; Strizhakova, Coulter, and Price 2021).

### 5.1. Participants and statistical power

This study conducted an online survey with a sample of 108 college student participants (66% females and 34% males,  $M_{\text{age}} = 20.46$  years) recruited from a university in Seoul. Upon providing consent, they received a link to an online questionnaire and completed questions about their characteristics, opinions, and demographic information. The power analysis was conducted for the adequacy of the

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and correlations (Study 2).

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Desire for Control	5.00	1.07	1			
2. Fresh Start Mindset	4.44	1.33	0.26**	1		
3. Global Identity	4.48	1.29	0.19*	0.34***	1	
4. Environmental Consciousness	4.10	1.35	0.12	0.30**	0.71***	1

Note: \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

sample size. This sample size yields 88% power to detect the medium effect size for the coefficient of determination.

## 5.2. Measures

### 5.2.1. Dependent variable

Environmental consciousness measures participants' preference for environmentally friendly products, known as green consumption values, with a seven-item scale ( $\alpha = 0.94$ ; Haws, Winterich, and Naylor 2014).

### 5.2.2. Independent variables

There are two independent variables and their interaction. The desire for control, an independent variable, was measured using four extracted items from Burger and Cooper (1979) scale: 'I try to avoid situations where someone else tells me what to do,' 'I would prefer to be a leader rather than a follower,' 'I enjoy being able to influence the action of others,' and 'I enjoy having control over my own destiny.' This abbreviated scale demonstrated similar internal consistency to the original scale ( $\alpha = 0.71$ ). This study is grounded on the presumption that an individual's desire for control intensifies when their perceived control is threatened or below a neutral level (Wortman and Brehm 1975). However, it is noteworthy that perceived control refers to an individual's cognitive assessment of control under specific circumstances (Evans, Shapiro, and Lewis 1993; Rotter 1966), whereas the desire for control is a personality trait (Burger 1992).

Another independent variable, the fresh start mindset, was measured using the six-item Fresh Start Mindset Scale (Price et al. 2018), which assessed participants' beliefs, such as 'regardless of present circumstances, someone can chart a new course in life' and 'it is always possible for someone to get a new beginning' ( $\alpha = 0.86$ ). The interaction term was calculated by multiplying these two variables.

### 5.2.3. Mediator variable

Global identity measures how participants view themselves as citizens of a worldwide culture (Ng and Basu 2019). The study used a four-item global identity

scale, with statements such as 'I have a strong attachment to the global world,' 'I think of myself as a global citizen,' 'It is important to me to feel a part of the global world,' and 'thinking about my identity, I view myself as a global citizen' ( $\alpha = 0.85$ ). As covariates, the study measured and statistically controlled for the number of overseas travel experiences within the past five years and the average number of hours spent on social networking sites per day.

## 5.3. Results

First, the correlational analysis examines relationships between participants' traits variables, including the desire for control, global identity, and their inclination to express environmental value through purchasing and consumption behaviors (see Table 2). The desire for control positively correlated with a belief in the fresh start mindset ( $r = 0.26$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and global identity ( $r = 0.19$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). However, it showed no significant correlation with a heightened concern for environmental consciousness (i.e., green marketing). These findings support the premise that global identity may function as a form of group-based control, particularly among individuals who perceive a low sense of control. Furthermore, in line with Strizhakova, Coulter, and Price (2021) cross-national findings in the United States, Mexico, and Russia, this study also revealed a positive relationship between the fresh start mindset and global identity ( $r = 0.34$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), as well as environmental consciousness ( $r = 0.30$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) within the South Korean sample.

### 5.3.1. Predicting global identity and environmental consciousness

Ordinary least squares regression analyses examined whether the interaction between the desire for control and the fresh start mindset predicted global identity and environmental consciousness significantly. The results of the analysis indicated that the desire for control ( $\beta = -0.81$ ,  $SE = 0.37$ ,  $t(104) = -2.19$ ,  $p = 0.03$ ) and its interaction with the fresh start mindset ( $\beta = 0.21$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ ,  $t(104) = 2.69$ ,  $p = 0.008$ ) were significant predictors of global identity. The fresh start mindset alone marginally predicted global identity ( $\beta = -0.79$ ,  $SE = 0.41$ ,  $t(104) = -1.90$ ,  $p = 0.06$ ). However,

Table 3. Study 2: Regression analysis results for moderated mediation.

Variable	The path from DC to GI			The path from GI to EC		
	$\beta$	SE	$t(101)$	$\beta$	SE	$t(102)$
Desire for Control (DC)	−0.88	0.37	−2.36*	−0.02	0.09	−0.20
Fresh start mindset (FSM)	−0.90	0.42	−2.14*			
DC × FSM	0.23	0.08	2.88**			
Global Identity (GI)				−0.73	0.07	10.03***
Overseas travel	−0.07	0.07	−1.10	−0.07	0.05	−1.35
Hours on SNS	−0.03	0.03	−1.19	−0.04	0.02	−1.59

Note. N = 108. Environmental consciousness (EC) represents the dependent variable. The model for the path from DC to GI was  $r^2 = .20$ ,  $F(5, 101) = 5.11$ ,  $p < .001$ . The model for the path from GI to EC was  $r^2 = .54$ ,  $F(4, 102) = 29.36$ ,  $p < .0001$ . \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

none of these variables significantly predicted environmental consciousness: desire for control ( $\beta = 0.08$ ,  $SE = 0.41$ ,  $t(104) = 0.21$ ,  $p = 0.84$ ), fresh start mindset ( $\beta = 0.32$ ,  $SE = 0.46$ ,  $t(104) = 0.70$ ,  $p = 0.48$ ), or their interaction ( $\beta = -0.01$ ,  $SE = 0.09$ ,  $t(104) = -0.07$ ,  $p = 0.95$ ). These results suggest a negligible direct effect of the desire for control on environmental consciousness. Nevertheless, there was an indirect effect: global identity mediated the impact of the desire for control on environmental consciousness, contingent on the fresh start mindset (Hayes 2018; Zhao, Lynch Jr., and Chen 2010).

### 5.3.2. Moderated mediation analyses

While the direct effect of the desire for control on environmental consciousness was insignificant, the study examined whether the fresh mindset could moderate the mediation effect of global identity on the relationship (Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes 2007). The study employed Model 7, as outlined by Hayes (2018), to investigate whether the conditional indirect effect of global identity on the relationship between the desire for control and environmental consciousness was contingent on the fresh start mindset. Using 5,000 bootstrapping samples, the index of moderated mediation was significant,  $b = 0.17$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ , 95%  $CI = [0.06, 0.30]$ , providing evidence for moderated mediation.

Further, the analysis revealed a significantly positive conditional indirect effect for individuals exhibiting a greater belief (+1 SD) in the fresh start mindset,  $b = 0.33$ ,  $SE = 0.14$ , 95%  $CI = [0.12, 0.64]$ . Conversely, the conditional indirect effect was not statistically significant for individuals with medium (mean) levels of belief in the fresh start mindset,  $b = 0.11$ ,  $SE = 0.14$ , 95%  $CI = [-0.04, 0.31]$ , nor for those with low levels (−1 SD) of belief in the fresh start mindset,  $b = -0.12$ ,  $SE = 0.10$ , 95%  $CI = [-0.31, 0.11]$ . The results remained consistent when controlling for covariates of overseas travel experiences and the average number of hours spent on social network sites (see Table 3).

### 5.4. Discussion

Study 2 employed different measures for the same concepts proposed in the hypotheses and provided converging evidence for group-based control among individuals who feel a lower sense of control in the context of green marketing being contingent on their fresh start mindset. Through the negative relationship between the desire for control and global identity, this study also confirmed the assumption that a lower level of control necessitates a higher desire for control in an opposite direction. Consistent with prior literature, a diminished sense of control often leads individuals to perceive themselves as less competent or having reduced agency (Rotter 1966), which, in turn, naturally increases their desire for control. This perception could result in reduced long-term planning and investment, as individuals may believe in the limited impact of their actions. Their temporal focus on the present could link to local rather than global identity. Notably, the desire for control didn't directly influence individuals' interest in green marketing. However, its mediated impact through global identity was significant only for individuals with strong beliefs in fresh starts.

## 6. General discussion

This study investigated the fresh start effect in motivating businesses and individuals who experience reduced control when part of a group. An empirical analysis of public data (Study 1) and a survey (Study 2) demonstrated that a diminished sense of personal control could activate the fresh start effect in the context of collective actions mediated by global identity.

### 6.1. Theoretical and practical implications

This study makes theoretical contributions in three main areas. First, this research extends the investigation of the fresh start effect and fresh start mindset beyond individual goal pursuits by encompassing social or group-level goal pursuit behaviors. The

significance lies in empirically expanding the scope of the fresh start effect into the context of collective behaviors related to energy consumption and carbon emissions. While the fresh start effect is well-established as an effective motivator for individuals, interpersonal aspirations, and goal-related behaviors (Dai, Milkman, and Riis 2014, 2015), its impact on collectively pursued goal behaviors remained unexplored. This study empirically demonstrated that the fresh start effect operates effectively in collective social goal behaviors as well, substantiating [hypothesis 1](#).

Furthermore, this research partially contributes to the literature on the psychological mechanisms of the fresh start effect. Dai, Milkman, and Riis (2014, 2015) proposed that the mechanism of the fresh start effect involves the psychological “discontinuities” of continuous time. Indeed, Hahnel et al. (2020) proposed that mental accounting can effectively intervene in policy and practices to foster energy conservation. Therefore, this study’s observed fresh start effect provides empirical evidence for a manifestation of the psychological discontinuities in contexts of energy decision-making.

Second, this study expands the field of compensatory control theory (CCT: Kay et al. 2008) by introducing a novel form of group-based control, termed the fresh start effect. The fresh start effect also aligns with Fritzsche (2022) concept of group-based control. Based on the belief in living one’s desired life, personal control can become vulnerable when exposed to uncertain or unpredictable situations. In such cases, individuals often seek a strategy to restore diminished control, which provides various means. Fritzsche (2022) proposed two ways to regain control through a group: identification with agentic in-groups and participation in collective actions or maintaining accordance with the in-group norms. Extant literature has empirically demonstrated the role of the first type of group-based control restoration through identification with brands consumed or purchased (Beck, Rahinel, and Bleier 2020; Inesi et al. 2011). In contrast, research on the group-based compensatory control obtained through collective actions or adherence to in-group norms is scarce. This study empirically demonstrates a case of the second type of group-based control: how and why a fresh start motivates people to engage in collective actions as a means to restore threatened personal control.

Lastly, this study contributes to transformative consumer research. A recent trend in consumer research has shifted its attention toward comprehending how consumption can tangibly advance consumers’ socio-environmental well-being and contentment (Mick et al. 2012). In this context, transformative consumer

research seeks to instigate goal-directed and sustainable problem-solving behaviors among consumers who grapple with multifaceted societal obligations in the modern era. By demonstrating the relationship between the need for control and the fresh start effect, this study offers valuable insights into the pivotal function of collective actions in incentivizing group-based control mechanisms.

Furthermore, this study provides helpful strategic suggestions for policymakers and businesses interested in promoting collective green marketing actions. Using temporal markers or framing messages with fresh starts could motivate individuals and businesses to participate in collective actions for societal goals as society members.

## 6.2. Limitations and directions for future research

Despite its theoretical and practical contributions, this study also has some limitations. One limitation of this research is the exclusive examination of chronic or inherent threats of personal control in both studies. In Study 1, resource availability constrained the operationalization of control levels, while Study 2 centered on participants’ intrinsic need for control. Since the sense of control can also weaken incidentally, such as through the recollection of instances of diminished control (Cutright 2012; Whitson and Galinsky 2008), the resulting patterns of control restoration strategies might exhibit variations in the context of the fresh start effect on collective actions. Nonetheless, an investigation into this scenario remains unanswered.

Second, the societal goals to address climate change employed in both studies, the reduction of carbon emissions through energy conservation in Study 1 and the environmental consciousness in Study 2, do not contradict individual goals. Collective actions for such issues can benefit both individuals and society. Still, questions remain when divisive issues arise where individual and societal interests are at odds. Since participants in Study 1 anticipate getting incentives for meeting certain criteria, the presence of incentives can further benefit individual engagement in collective actions aimed at achieving societal goals. Hence, researchers should use caution to interpret this research’s outcomes. It is possible that the observed fresh start effect of those experiencing a low sense of control on environmental collective actions could be limited to when the individual goals align with the societal goals. Further investigations would be needed to validate these findings.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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