

DOES NON-PARTICIPATION EQUAL APATHY? RE-EXAMINING NON-INVOLVEMENT IN COLLECTIVE ACTION THROUGH A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW (SLR)

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Abstrak

Sejumlah penelitian menunjukkan penurunan partisipasi individu dalam aksi kolektif. Namun, kajian psikologi sosial masih lebih banyak berfokus pada faktor-faktor yang mendorong keterlibatan, sementara ketidakikutsertaan (*inaction*) kerap diperlakukan semata-mata sebagai kebalikan dari aksi kolektif. Padahal, ketidakikutsertaan dapat merefleksikan dinamika psikologis dan sosial yang berbeda dan tidak selalu identik dengan apati. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk meninjau secara sistematis bagaimana ketidakikutsertaan dalam aksi kolektif didefinisikan dan apa saja *antecedent* yang mendorong individu memilih untuk tidak berpartisipasi. Studi ini menggunakan pendekatan *systematic literature review* (SLR) dengan mengacu pada pedoman PRISMA. Pencarian literatur dilakukan melalui dua basis data, yaitu Scopus dan Web of Science. Dari total 326 artikel yang teridentifikasi, sebanyak 13 artikel memenuhi kriteria inklusi dan dianalisis lebih lanjut. Hasil tinjauan menunjukkan adanya inkonsistensi dalam pendefinisian ketidakikutsertaan, yang sering kali dipahami hanya sebagai ketiadaan aksi kolektif. Selain itu, tinjauan ini mengidentifikasi sejumlah *antecedent* utama ketidakikutsertaan, meliputi rendahnya efikasi politik, disidentifikasi kelompok, pengaruh jaringan sosial, respons berorientasi ingroup, serta *passive hope*. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa ketidakikutsertaan dalam aksi kolektif memiliki dinamika tersendiri dan tidak selalu berakar pada ketidakpedulian. Oleh karena itu, penelitian ini menekankan pentingnya pengembangan konseptual yang lebih konsisten mengenai ketidakikutsertaan serta perlunya penelitian lanjutan yang secara spesifik memeriksa mekanisme psikologis di balik pilihan untuk tidak bertindak dalam konteks aksi kolektif.

Kata kunci: aksi kolektif; gerakan sosial; ketidakikutsertaan

Abstract

Several studies have reported a decline in individual participation in collective action. However, social psychological research has largely focused on factors that encourage engagement, while non-participation (*inaction*) is often treated merely as the opposite of collective action. In fact, non-participation may reflect distinct psychological and social dynamics and is not always synonymous with apathy. This study aims to systematically review how non-participation in collective action is defined and to identify the antecedents that lead individuals to choose not to participate. This study employs a systematic literature review (SLR) approach guided by the PRISMA guidelines. The literature search was conducted using two databases, namely Scopus and Web of Science. Of the 326 articles identified, 13 met the inclusion criteria and were analyzed further. The results of the review reveal inconsistencies in the definition of non-participation, which is often understood merely as the absence of collective action. In addition, the review identifies several key antecedents of non-participation, including low political efficacy, group disidentification, the influence of social networks, ingroup-oriented responses, and passive hope. These findings emphasize that non-participation in collective action has its own dynamics and does not always stem from indifference. Therefore, this study highlights the importance of developing a more consistent conceptualization of non-participation and the need for further research that specifically examines the psychological mechanisms underlying the choice not to act in the context of collective action.

Keywords: collective action; social movement; inaction

INTRODUCTION

“I will not be a slave to fear.” — *Robert the Bruce* in *Outlaw King*.

When the Scottish kings swore allegiance to Edward Longshanks—the King of England—William Wallace continued his resistance. The non-participation of the Scottish kings in the struggle to reclaim their homeland from English rule ultimately ended in tragedy for Wallace. As a demonstration of English brutality, Wallace was executed, and his body was displayed in an exceptionally cruel manner: his limbs were hung outside the city as a public spectacle of defeat and a warning meant to intimidate Scottish rebels. The promise to liberate Scotland soon vanished, and Edward Longshanks proceeded to treat Scotland as a colonized territory, intensifying repression against both the Scottish nobility and its people.

The narrative of *Outlaw King* is emotionally striking. Although the film concludes with Robert the Bruce’s military victory, it powerfully conveys a critical moral message: inaction brings catastrophe. The reluctance of the Scottish kings to participate in the liberation effort constrained Robert the Bruce’s ability to mobilize the masses, thereby prolonging the suffering endured by the Scottish people. *Outlaw King* is set in the early fourteenth century, particularly between 1304 and 1307, when Robert the Bruce initiated his campaign to free Scotland from English domination. Compared to the modern era, societies have undoubtedly undergone substantial development. Yet social psychologists remain confronted with a fundamental question: what leads individuals to choose inaction? This question persists as a puzzle because in many contexts, inaction is often treated as the mere opposite of collective action (Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2014), despite the fact that this assumption does not always hold. Inaction possesses its own nuances and understanding its antecedents can offer new perspectives for policy formulation or for mobilizing groups to transform their collective conditions (Stuart et al., 2018).

Collective action constitutes an essential form of social protest aimed at improving group conditions (e.g., ethnic, national, or religious groups; Moghaddam, 2018). The Black Lives Matter movement in the United States, for instance, emerged following a series of police killings of unarmed Black men and women and drew widespread attention. This movement was catalyzed by the fatal shooting of Trayvon Martin in 2012 by George Zimmerman (Begeny et al., 2022). Similarly, the #MeToo slogan, introduced in 2006 by Tarana Burke—an African American civil rights activist—was intended to raise awareness of sexual harassment and sexual violence in society. The term later evolved into a broad social movement aimed at increasing awareness of sexual violence against women, encouraging victims to pursue legal action against perpetrators, and providing support for survivors to speak openly about their experiences (Kende et al., 2020). In general, collective action seeks to bring about profound changes in social structures or within communities as a whole. Such social movements are crucial as counterbalances to the power often held by majorities or governments; however, their impact remains limited when individuals choose not to participate.

Non-participation in collective action is a complex phenomenon that cannot be reduced to random behavior. Research indicates that inaction is often shaped by a range of psychological and social factors, rather than mere apathy or coincidence. Stuart et al. (2018) argue that individuals may engage in motivated inaction, defined as a deliberate decision to refrain from action due to negative evaluations of a movement’s legitimacy or effectiveness. This suggests that inaction may represent a strategic response to social dynamics rather than a passive stance. Olson (1965) further emphasized that individuals tend to focus on maximizing potential personal benefits. In the context of collective action, this often leads to free-riding, whereby

individuals choose not to participate because they can still enjoy the benefits generated by others' efforts. When such individual decisions accumulate, they can ultimately undermine the effectiveness of social movements.

Accordingly, studies on inaction are critically important (Schwenkenbecher, 2022; van Bezouw et al., 2019) as they offer valuable insights into social dynamics, motivational processes, and barriers to effective collective behavior. Nevertheless, relatively few studies have systematically examined how inaction in collective action is conceptualized and what factors motivate individuals to refrain from participating in collective action (Hensby, 2017; Klandermans, 2014). This limitation is particularly problematic given that non-participation is often implicitly interpreted as apathy, potentially leading to misinterpretations of social and political dynamics and to ineffective strategies for collective mobilization. Given this gap, robust scholarly resources are needed to advance understanding of how inaction in collective action contexts develops in contemporary society. Therefore, the primary objective of the present study is to address the following research questions: how is inaction in collective action defined in the existing literature, and what psychological and social antecedents are identified as motivating individuals to choose not to participate in collective action? To this end, the present study conducts a systematic literature review to synthesize existing knowledge on inaction in collective action.

METHOD

Design

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 framework (Page et al., 2021). The databases selected for this review were Scopus and Web of Science. The literature search was limited to Scopus and Web of Science because these databases are widely recognized as the most comprehensive and authoritative indexing platforms for peer-reviewed journals in the social sciences, including social psychology. Both databases provide rigorous journal selection criteria, high-quality metadata, and advanced filtering options that support transparent and replicable systematic literature reviews.

To identify studies relevant to the research questions, the following combination of keywords was used: (“collective action” OR “social movement” OR “group behavior” OR “collective behavior”) AND (“inaction” OR “non-participation” OR “lack of participation” OR “non-engagement” OR “passivity”). Although these terms have distinct conceptual definitions, they were included together because they are analytically connected through their shared focus on group-based action and non-action in collective contexts. In the social psychological literature, processes of participation and non-participation are often examined across these overlapping domains, even when different terminologies are employed. The inclusion of these terms was therefore intended to capture variation in terminology while maintaining a consistent analytical focus on inaction in collective and group-based contexts. The literature search was conducted in October 2024.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Table 1 presents the inclusion and exclusion criteria applied to identify studies that were relevant and met the eligibility requirements. The screening process consisted of four stages. In the initial stage, database filters were applied to restrict the publication year to studies published no earlier than 2014. The temporal restriction to studies published from 2014 onward was not intended to suggest that research on collective action is limited to this period. Rather, this decision was made to capture contemporary developments in the conceptualization of

inaction within collective action research. Around this period, the literature began to more explicitly problematize non-participation as a phenomenon with distinct psychological dynamics, rather than treating it solely as the inverse of collective action. Limiting the review to the last decade also ensured the relevance of the findings to current social, political, and digital contexts, while maintaining a manageable and methodologically coherent scope for the systematic review. Subsequently, to ensure consistency across the review, only peer-reviewed journal articles were included as an eligibility criterion. Consequently, other types of publications, such as book reviews and conference papers, were excluded from the analysis.

Table 1.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Step	Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
1	Publication year	Published within the last 10 years	Studies published before 2014
2	Type of literature	Journal articles	Reviews, conference papers, book chapters, notes, and all document types other than research articles
3	Topic	Studies focusing on inaction in the context of collective action	Studies not aligned with the research objectives
4	Language	Articles written in English	Articles written in languages other than English
5	Accessibility	Full-text articles accessible to the researchers	Articles requiring special access conditions to be read

In addressing the research questions, the focus of the studies to be reviewed had to be aligned with discussions of inaction within the context of collective action in society. Accordingly, research articles that were not relevant to the research topic were set as exclusion criteria. Language was also specified as an inclusion criterion, with English required as the language of publication for the studies to be reviewed. In addition, the researchers were required to have full access to the studies in order to facilitate a thorough review process.

Identification and Selection of Studies

As noted previously, the researchers sought to uphold principles of research transparency; therefore, the PRISMA guidelines were followed to ensure clarity in the review process. The initial search yielded a total of 326 research articles across the two databases, comprising 121 articles from Scopus and 205 articles from Web of Science. Duplicate records were identified using a computer-based reference management system (Mendeley), resulting in 203 unique articles. Subsequently, the inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied, and 97 articles were found to meet the predefined criteria. In the final stage, full-text screening was conducted. However, the majority of these articles did not explicitly address inaction within the context of collective action. As a result, 85 articles were excluded, leaving 13 articles to be included in the subsequent analysis.

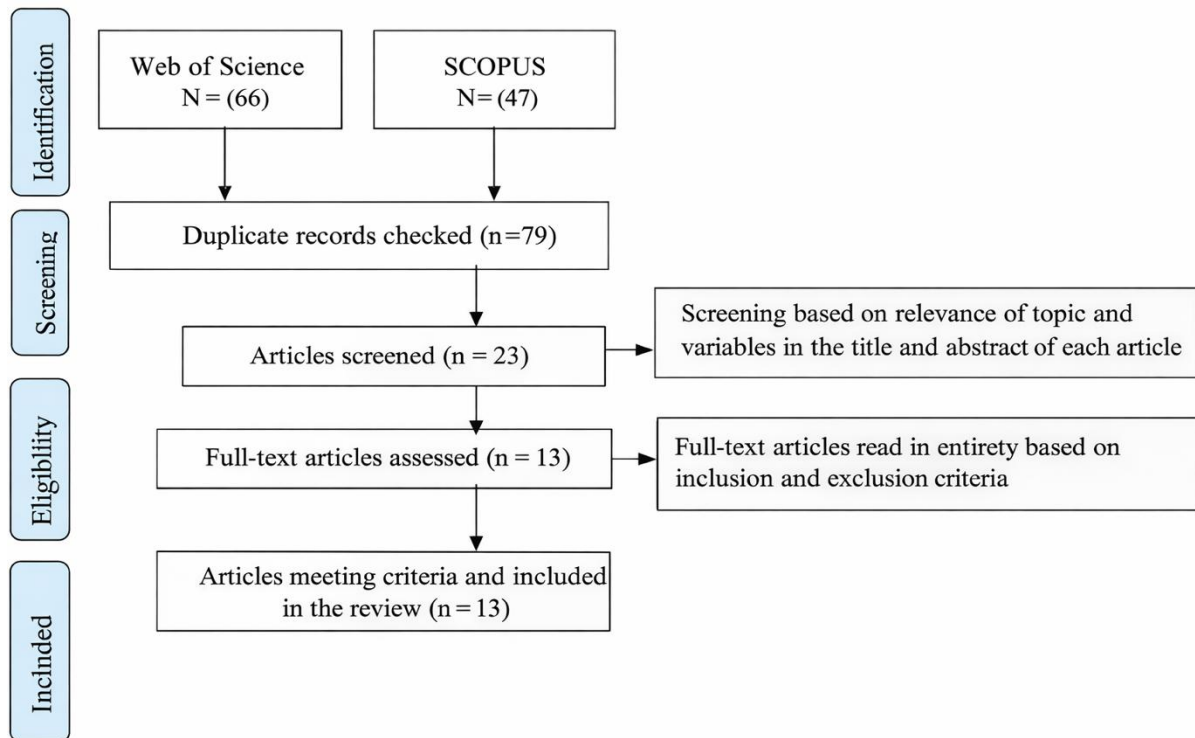


Figure 1. PRISMA flowchart depicting the literature search process at each stage

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Before further addressing the research questions, descriptive analysis was conducted to outline the general characteristics of the articles included in this SLR (Table 1). Among the 13 articles, van Bezouw, Závecz, Penna, Rijken, Klandermans, and Uluğ (2019) examined the largest number of countries (Brazil, Hungary, and the Netherlands) compared to other studies, which focused on a single country. However, this study involved a relatively smaller number of participants due to its use of focus group discussions as the data collection method (144 participants). The study with the largest sample size was conducted by Shuman et al. (2021), involving a total of 3,650 participants, followed by Bell et al. (2023) with 780 participants, differing by only 55 participants from Born and Akkerman (2017). The remaining studies included no more than 150 participants.

In terms of data collection methods, Feldman (2021) was the most distinctive study, as it employed a mixed-methods approach combining surveys and group discussions. In contrast, the majority of studies relied on survey methods, such as Bell et al. (2023) and Travaglino et al. (2016). In addition, most studies recruited adult members of the general population as their research samples (seven studies), with only a small number relying on students as participants.

Tabel 2. *Studies Included*

Article Author(s)	Article Type	Inaction Context
B. Klandermans & van Stekelenburg (2014)	Conceptual Article	Demonstrations in general
Becker et al. (2015)	Research Article	Daily sexism
Bell et al. (2023)	Research Article	Opposition to the Mountain Valley Pipeline

Article Author(s)	Article Type	Inaction Context
Born & Akkerman (2017)	Research Article	Factory workers' strike
Feldman (2021)	Research Article	Youth climate change demonstrations
Pickering (2023)	Research Article	Demonstrations in general
Shuman et al. (2021)	Research Article	Demonstrations in general
Stroebe et al. (2019)	Research Article	Demonstrations in general
Stuart et al. (2018)	Research Article	Demonstrations in general
Terpe (2016)	Conceptual Article	Demonstrations in general
Travaglino et al. (2016)	Research Article	Resistance against criminal organizations
Uysal et al. (2025)	Theoretical Article	Demonstrations in general
van Bezouw et al. (2019)	Research Article	Demonstration actions in Brazil, Hungary, and the Netherlands

1. Definition of Inaction

Non-participation in collective action (inaction) is interchangeably referred to in the literature as passivity, non-attendance, or non-participation. Despite the use of different terms, many of the reviewed studies conceptualize inaction as the opposite of collective action (e.g., Becker et al., 2015; Stroebe et al., 2019; van Bezouw et al., 2019). Importantly, this definition does not represent an a priori operational definition adopted by the present study, but rather emerges as a synthesized finding from the articles reviewed. Nevertheless, research on non-participation essentially examines the absence of collective action, while recognizing that individuals have diverse reasons for deciding whether to engage or not engage in collective action. Accordingly, Hensby (2021) emphasized that defining non-participation is inherently difficult. Similar arguments suggest that although inaction can be understood as the opposite of collective action, it nevertheless possesses its own distinct nuances.

Despite these challenges, several studies have attempted to define inaction (Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2014). Shuman et al. (2021) defined inaction as passivity, namely individuals' reluctance to engage in collective action, while also noting that non-participation may function as a tactical choice. Members of disadvantaged groups may expect that by refraining from action, they will receive more favorable treatment from advantaged groups. A similar perspective was advanced by Feldman (2021), who stressed that non-participation in collective action does not necessarily indicate indifference or apathy. Active non-participation in political activities, such as abstaining from or boycotting an event, represents a response that is distinct from apathy.

Bell et al. (2023) further differentiated inaction into two forms: acquiescence and quiescence. Acquiescence refers to remaining inactive due to deep acceptance of existing conditions and perceiving these conditions as normal, without recognizing alternative possibilities for changing group circumstances. Quiescence, in contrast, describes inaction that occurs despite individuals' awareness that the disadvantages they experience are unjust and that there is potential for changing the status quo.

2. Antecedents of Inaction

Klandermans and van Stekelenburg (2014) argued that the primary reason individuals engage in inaction is their failure to be mobilized. Mobilization in collective action consists of two processes: consensus mobilization and action mobilization. Consensus mobilization refers to

the diffusion of ideas or viewpoints among group members, whereas action mobilization involves activating those who have already adopted these ideas to engage in concrete action (Klandermans, 1988). Although consensus mobilization is often the more demanding stage, individuals who have already adopted particular views or values may nevertheless still choose inaction. Several factors underlying such non-participation are outlined below.

2.1. Political Efficacy and Action Methods

Although inaction is often framed as the opposite of collective action, this is not always the case (Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2014). Accordingly, this review identifies several antecedents that specifically predict inaction. One study that clearly illustrates the distinction between the two is Feldman (2021). Feldman (2021) examined the motivations underlying adolescents' participation and non-participation in environmental protests. The findings showed that adolescents' motivation to engage in collective action was driven by anxiety—specifically, fear regarding future environmental conditions—and by expressions of solidarity with the movement. In contrast, those who did not attend were primarily motivated by low political efficacy, reflecting doubts that collective action would lead to meaningful outcomes. Feldman (2021) also noted the role of adults in adolescents' non-participation, particularly through the dissemination of information and the availability of transportation. In addition, teachers were found to indirectly constrain adolescents' participation, for example through heavy academic workloads.

Beyond Feldman (2021), van Bezouw et al. (2019) and Pickering (2023) also identified political efficacy as an antecedent of inaction. In the study by van Bezouw et al. (2019), evidence that political efficacy predicts collective inaction emerged from focus group discussions conducted with participants from various age groups across three countries: Brazil, Hungary, and the Netherlands. In Pickering's (2023) study, political efficacy was identified as one component of political activation that influences collective action participation. Other components of political activation included capacity, motivation, and mobilisation. Capacity refers to individuals' awareness that they possess the abilities or resources to engage in political activities, as well as their belief that participation can bring about change (political efficacy). Motivation refers to the level of drive or incentives that encourage individuals to engage in political activity, while mobilisation refers to the process through which individuals are invited or encouraged to participate.

Political efficacy operates as a general factor, such that regardless of the form of action, individuals with low political efficacy may perceive all types of action as futile in the face of unresponsive authorities. Nevertheless, many sympathizers choose not to participate purely because of the methods of action employed (Shuman et al., 2021). Compared to other forms of action, Shuman et al. (2021) found that non-normative and nonviolent collective action is more effective in attracting attention and garnering broader support from sympathizers.

2.2. Group Disidentification and Social Networks

Becker et al. (2015) and Uysal et al. (2025) identified ingroup identification as a predictor of inaction. In the study by Becker et al. (2015), this relationship operated through disidentification. In the context of collective action against sexism, using an ingroup identification framework, individuals were more willing to engage in confrontational action when they strongly identified with women as a group. Accordingly, disidentification with this group predicted a greater intention to engage in inaction when witnessing or encountering acts of harassment against women. The forms of collective action examined by Becker et al. (2015)

were not limited to demonstrations protesting policies related to women's safety, but also included normative collective actions commonly undertaken, such as signing petitions.

Similarly, the group identification examined by Uysal et al. (2025) influenced collective action through individuals' identification with climate activist groups. This identification predicted both confrontational and non-confrontational climate collective action. Notably, Uysal et al. (2025) showed that collective action and inaction were influenced by a shared predictor, while also being shaped by distinct variables. Confrontational climate collective action was predicted by present-day political risks of activism (risk of action), whereas non-confrontational climate collective action was predicted by future existential climate risks (risk of inaction).

Stuart et al. (2018) also demonstrated the importance individuals place on group identification, including situations in which individuals seek to avoid being associated with a particular group. They further explained that one motivation underlying inaction is the desire to avoid association with groups perceived as holding extreme left-wing ideologies. Even when individuals believe that certain conditions warrant collective struggle, they may still choose not to participate if they wish to avoid being perceived as affiliated with a particular group.

Beyond serving as an object of self-identification, group members themselves can exert pressure on individuals to either participate or refrain from participating in collective action. Bell et al. (2023) identified social networks as a key factor shaping this influence. In the context of protests against a pipeline project, Bell et al. (2023) found that although respondents reported that the pipeline negatively affected their quality of life, they were nine times more likely to remain inactive when their neighbors supported the project. Respondents were also five times more likely to choose inaction when they were unaware of their neighbors' views regarding the project. Conversely, respondents who joined social media groups focused on opposing the project were nine times more likely to engage in protest actions. Consistent with these findings, Born and Akkerman (2017) reported similar dynamics in labor strike protests, showing that individuals were more likely to choose inaction when coworkers expected them not to participate.

Identification with specific social groups can compel individuals to conform to prevailing norms, cultures, or ideologies within those groups. A study linking group ideology to inaction was conducted by Travaglino et al. (2016). Their findings indicated that the ideology of masculine honor adopted within Italian society discouraged engagement in collective action against criminal organizations. Honor was conceptualized as comprising two dimensions: virtue (e.g., honesty and loyalty) and reputation or status. The reputation/status dimension operated differently across genders. For women, honor functioned to maintain sexual purity and chastity, whereas for men it emphasized the ability to protect and support the family, uphold an image of strength, and display assertiveness in response to insult. In the Italian context examined by Travaglino et al. (2016), criminal organizations were conceptualized as emerging from attitudes embedded in a culture of honor. Consequently, individuals who endorsed masculine honor values were less likely to engage in collective action aimed at combating criminal organizations.

2.3. Ingroup-Oriented Responses

Stroebe et al. (2019) conducted a study aimed at examining why street-based collective actions have become less visible. Their findings indicated that ingroup collective action has emerged as an alternative form of action that offers group members various ways to improve their group's conditions. Unlike outgroup collective action (e.g., demonstrations or petitions),

ingroup collective action focuses on internal group processes, such as strengthening solidarity by defending heavily affected group members, communicating about ongoing situations, and providing mutual support. This form of collective action differs from traditional collective action in its focus and, as a result, may reduce individuals' likelihood of engaging in outgroup collective action (Stroebe et al., 2019).

2.4. Passive Hope

Hope is often considered a factor that motivates individuals to engage in collective action (Jasper, 2011). However, as a latent variable, hope encompasses a range of forms, including active hope and passive hope. Active hope refers to aspirations for improved conditions accompanied by efforts to achieve those conditions. In contrast, passive hope involves expectations of better conditions without corresponding efforts to bring about change (Swedberg, 2007). Terpe (2016) argued that passive hope can function as a barrier to participation in collective action. This conclusion was drawn from a review of accounts written by former prisoners of Nazi concentration camps, which suggested that hope isolated prisoners from one another and prevented them from engaging in collective resistance against their oppressors.

3. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The authors identified and analyzed several limitations reported in the reviewed literature. Discussing these limitations is important for providing a more critical perspective on the quality and validity of the research findings, thereby helping readers to better understand the scope of the literature's contributions and to identify opportunities for improvement and future research. The identified limitations are as follows:

3.1. Sample Limitations

Several studies reported limited generalizability due to the use of samples that primarily represented students or adolescents (e.g., Feldman, 2021; Uysal et al., 2025). Uysal et al. (2025) noted that their sample was dominated by students and activists—groups that tend to show higher levels of involvement in climate movements than the general population. This poses a concern because of representational bias, as members of the general public were underrepresented in the analysis. In addition, Uysal et al. (2025) acknowledged that their sample was restricted to the German population, which may limit the applicability of the findings to different cultural and sociopolitical contexts, as contextual factors can amplify or attenuate the influence of psychological factors on climate activism. Future research could adopt multi-country approaches to better examine the role of contextual factors in shaping risk perceptions within climate activism across regions.

Born and Akkerman (2017) reported similar limitations, noting that although their study was intended to include multiple labor unions, one union contributed a substantially larger number of respondents than the others. Stroebe et al. (2019) also highlighted sampling limitations in their Study 1, as participants self-selected into the research, likely representing a more proactive segment of the population. Stuart et al. (2018) further reported that a majority of their sample exhibited a left-leaning ideological orientation. This imbalance may have influenced the results, as ideological predispositions can shape individuals' preferences for particular forms of collective action. Accordingly, Stuart et al. (2018) recommended that future research consider more diverse recruitment strategies to examine how findings may differ across moderate and radical ideological groups.

3.2. Limitations in Types of Collective Action

One study that faced limitations related to the selection of collective action types was Shuman et al. (2021). The authors explained that their measurement of collective action focused exclusively on specific forms of collective action (e.g., normative collective action), which may not accurately reflect real-world conditions. In practice, movements supported by sympathizers rarely rely on a single form of collective action; rather, they often involve a combination of normative, non-normative, and violent collective actions within the same movement. Moreover, the influence of outgroups can act as a catalyst that alters the forms of collective action adopted in real-world contexts. As emphasized by Shuman et al. (2021), images of police officers beating protesters, releasing dogs, and attacking nonviolent Black demonstrators played a significant role in shifting White public opinion during the civil rights movement.

Furthermore, Shuman et al. (2021) recommended that protesters employ non-normative and nonviolent forms of collective action, as the disruptive yet constructive nature of these actions can render them more effective. Although these findings addressed the original research questions, they also raised new questions regarding the psychological factors within advantaged groups or outgroups that are influenced by non-normative and nonviolent collective action, leading them to concede to protesters' demands. Shuman et al. (2021) speculated that these psychological factors may include heightened attention to collective action and perceptions of equality, which contribute to the view that collective action undertaken by disadvantaged groups is legitimate. However, they also emphasized that these claims require empirical validation.

Stuart et al. (2018) encountered similar limitations. In their study, they surveyed public responses to various social issues while considering potential participation in collective action. However, Stuart et al. (2018) noted that their study could not make specific claims about particular types of movements due to the use of overly broad definitions of collective action. As a result, respondents may have relied on different forms of collective action—such as normative or non-normative collective action—while applying varying interpretations to what constituted collective action.

3.3. Limitations in Research Design and Methods

Becker et al. (2015), in their study on daily sexism experienced by women, found that many respondents reported a greater likelihood of engaging in both collective and individual confrontation rather than remaining completely non-confrontational when faced with instances of daily sexism. However, in practice, many women may choose to remain silent when encountering sexism in their everyday lives. This discrepancy highlights the need for alternative measurement approaches that more accurately capture real-world behavior. Becker et al. (2015) further suggested that future research should employ politicized social identities (e.g., identification with feminist groups), rather than relying solely on gender group membership, to better examine their relationship with collective action. In addition, they proposed exploring whether confrontation or collective action around a particular cause may itself strengthen individuals' social identification.

Other studies also reported methodological limitations. Bell et al. (2023) noted that several unanswered questions in their research would be better addressed through qualitative approaches. For example, qualitative research could provide deeper insights into why some individuals within a community internalize narratives of neoliberal development and subsequently support a project, while others do not. Although Stroebe et al. (2019) adopted a

qualitative approach, they acknowledged limitations in their ability to determine whether the actions reported by participants functioned as antecedents or consequences of inaction. Accordingly, they recommended that future research employ diverse methodological approaches to address the limitations associated with reliance on a single method.

Travaglino et al. (2016) identified limitations related primarily to the measurement items used in their study, which were likely to increase social desirability bias. They also noted that their second study did not incorporate the role of institutions that might mediate the relationship between the Honor Ideology for Manhood Scale (HIM) and intentions to engage in collective action. Consequently, Travaglino et al. (2016) suggested that future research explore how relationships with state institutions (e.g., the police) influence collective action against criminal organizations. Moreover, their study focused on the relationship between support for masculine honor and perceived mobilization goals to explain the emergence of inaction, while acknowledging that motives related to social and material costs may also shape decisions to act or refrain from acting. Accordingly, they recommended that future studies consider incorporating cost–benefit calculation frameworks (Klandermans, 1984).

Finally, van Bezouw et al. (2019) noted that the use of focus group discussions in data collection captured only a single time point, limiting the ability to observe changes in norms and attitudes toward political inaction over time. To better examine normative change in political inaction, they recommended the use of longitudinal designs, which would allow researchers to capture the dynamic evolution of norms related to political inaction.

Discussion

The literature review conducted in this study supports the authors' initial assumption, which was also previously articulated by Klandermans and van Stekelenburg (2014), that although inaction is the opposite of collective action, in many circumstances it possesses its own distinct dynamics. Nevertheless, misunderstandings surrounding inaction largely stem from the inconsistent use of terminology across the literature (e.g., van Bezouw et al., 2019; Stroebe et al., 2019; Becker et al., 2015). A similar point was raised by Kleinig (1976) through an illustrative analogy: “At the present moment, for example, I am not walking a tightrope in Moscow or ringbarking a tree” (p. 393). Although such statements are factually correct, framing them in this way implies that not performing these actions results from neglect, failure, or omission. In reality, individuals cannot always be held responsible for acts of inaction that are unattributable, such as failing to rescue someone in another part of the world whose existence they are unaware of. Conversely, there are forms of inaction for which individuals can reasonably be held accountable (attributable inaction), such as deliberately choosing not to help a friend who has requested assistance.

Reasons for not engaging in collective action may also take the form of strategic choices aimed at improving group conditions and influencing situational dynamics in ways that compel other parties to act (Feldman, 2021; Shuman et al., 2021), such as deliberately refusing to pay taxes. Accordingly, Schwenkenbecher (2022b) distinguished between two forms of non-doing: inaction and omission. Inaction refers to not acting without conscious awareness on the part of the individual, whereas omission involves a deliberate decision to refrain from participation for specific reasons. A similar distinction was proposed by Bell et al. (2023), who differentiated inaction into acquiescence and quiescence. The key distinction lies in whether individuals engage in inaction with or without awareness of alternative actions that could potentially change their group's conditions.

Providing a clear and precise definition of inaction in collective action research is crucial for several reasons. Most importantly, it facilitates a deeper understanding of social movement dynamics (e.g., Becker et al., 2015; Feldman, 2021), the motivations underlying collective action (Shuman et al., 2021), and the broader implications of inaction across different contexts (e.g., Travaglino et al., 2016; van Bezouw, Závecz, Penna et al., 2019). Moreover, clarifying the distinction between inaction and collective action is necessary because the two can simultaneously function as opposites in contexts of negligence or indifference—where individuals do not participate due to lack of concern—while in other contexts inaction may be deliberately chosen as a strategy to pressure advantaged groups or institutions to change or maintain existing policies (Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2014). Based on the reviewed literature, inaction in collective action can be defined as the absence of engagement in group-based actions aimed at social or political change, which may occur either as a passive state or as a deliberate and meaningful choice shaped by psychological, social, and contextual factors. Importantly, this definition emphasizes that inaction should not be equated solely with apathy, as individuals may refrain from participation due to low political efficacy, disidentification with the group, perceived social norms, strategic considerations, or alternative forms of group-oriented responses.

This review also identified several antecedents that trigger inaction, which were grouped into four broad categories: political efficacy and action methods; group disidentification and social networks; ingroup-oriented responses; and passive hope. Across these antecedents, many studies relied on the social identity theory framework (e.g., Becker et al., 2015; Bell et al., 2023; Stuart et al., 2018; Uysal, 2013). Social identity theory has been widely used to explain how individuals define themselves in relation to their group memberships (Tajfel, 1979). Identification with a group influences behavior, attitudes, and social interactions across contexts, and is inherently fluid. Consistent with the findings of Born and Akkerman (2017), peers exert substantial influence in shaping collective action participation. Expectations communicated by fellow group members regarding an individual's role in collective action can be particularly powerful, especially when there is pressure not to participate. This highlights the central role of group processes in shaping individual decision-making.

In addition, Feldman (2021), van Bezouw et al. (2019), and Pickering (2023) drew on social identity theory to explain how low political efficacy leads individuals to withdraw from collective action. In the context of collective action, political efficacy can be defined as individuals' or groups' beliefs about their capacity to influence political processes and outcomes through collective efforts. The Social Identity Model of Collective Action (SIMCA) extends social identity theory by providing a theoretical framework for understanding the role of political efficacy in collective action (van Zomeren, 2013). According to SIMCA, social identity plays a central role in motivating political participation by fostering beliefs in collective efficacy. These beliefs often emerge from shared grievances and a sense of collective identity, which together motivate individuals to engage in political action to address perceived injustices (Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2017; van Zomeren et al., 2008).

Another antecedent of inaction grounded in social identity theory is disidentification. Group identification refers to the extent to which individuals regard their group membership as part of their personal identity, shaping the extent to which group goals are internalized as personal goals (Becker & Tausch, 2014). Disidentification, by contrast, involves not only the absence of identification but also an active desire not to belong to a particular group (Becker & Tausch, 2014). Barreto and Ellemers (2000) noted that individuals may experience threat when categorized into an undesired group, prompting them to emphasize their distinctiveness from

other group members or to perceive the group as unrepresentative of themselves. For example, individuals working in an organization with a negative reputation may disidentify by emphasizing how they differ from other employees. Disidentification can also foster inaction when individuals seek to avoid being associated with those engaging in collective action, such as avoiding being labeled as left-wing.

The choice of action methods further influences individuals' willingness to participate in collective action. Some individuals opt for inaction when the methods employed by their group conflict with their personal beliefs (Shuman et al., 2021). The success of collective action depends not only on advantaged and disadvantaged groups, but also on public opinion in legitimizing and amplifying disadvantaged groups' demands. Violent collective action may backfire by alienating public support (Orazani & Leidner, 2019), while peaceful collective action may be perceived as ineffective and ignored, particularly by members of advantaged groups invested in maintaining the status quo. To address these challenges and encourage broader participation, Shuman et al. (2021) recommended the use of non-normative, nonviolent collective action as a strategic approach capable of balancing disruption and legitimacy.

Another noteworthy finding of this literature review is that several antecedents of inaction do not appear to predict collective action. Instead, their effects emerge specifically in predicting inaction, such as ingroup collective action (Stroebe et al., 2019), passive hope (Terpe, 2016), and beliefs related to masculine honor (Travaglino et al., 2016). The study by Stroebe et al. (2019) was motivated by the observation that although injustice has become increasingly widespread, collective action has become relatively rare as a means of societal resistance. This led to the assumption that people may rely on alternative forms of collective action beyond those traditionally emphasized by scholars, namely outgroup collective action. Their findings indicated that while demonstrations have become less frequent, collective action at the grassroots level persists in a different form, namely ingroup collective action.

Passive hope was also proposed by Terpe (2016) as a factor that may foster inaction. This proposition is grounded in the distinction between passive and active hope, with the former lacking concrete efforts to change group conditions. In addition, cultural factors emerged as influential in shaping inaction, as demonstrated by Travaglino et al. (2016) in the Italian context. Their findings indicated that masculine honor ideology increases individuals' willingness to take risks and, in some contexts, their readiness to respond aggressively to perceived national threats. However, support for masculine honor was also associated with lower intentions to engage in collective action against criminal organizations, which functioned as advantaged groups in that context, thereby promoting inaction.

Finally, this review also examined limitations and directions for future research. Sample-related limitations were common, particularly the reliance on samples dominated by specific age groups, such as adolescents. This pattern reflects the fact that many studies were conducted in university settings, resulting in samples composed largely of students in adolescence or early adulthood. This limits the representativeness of findings and constrains their generalizability across broader age groups. Another limitation concerns the types of collective action examined. Real-world contexts are inherently complex and often involve diverse action strategies; focusing on a narrow range of collective action types restricts scholars' ability to fully understand why individuals refrain from participation. The final limitation relates to research methods. A strong reliance on a single methodological approach constrains understanding of inaction. Many studies employed qualitative methods, which are valuable for exploration but limited in their ability to establish causal relationships.

CONCLUSION

Across the 13 studies reviewed to elucidate inaction in collective action contexts, the authors found that inaction is generally conceptualized as the opposite of collective action. Consequently, several antecedents are shared by both variables, albeit operating in different directions (i.e., positive versus negative effects). Notably, the review also identified several antecedents that uniquely predict inaction, such as ingroup collective action and passive hope. However, the existing literature is limited by the lack of a consistent definition of inaction, which weakens the ability to provide a comprehensive account of its dynamics. Moreover, the studies included in this SLR exhibit multiple limitations, including constraints related to sample characteristics, the types of collective action examined, and research design and methodological approaches.

Theoretically, this study underscores that non-participation (*inaction*) should not be understood merely as the opposite of collective action, but rather as a phenomenon with distinct psychological and social dynamics. These findings challenge the assumption of symmetry in collective action research and highlight the need for theoretical models that explicitly distinguish the mechanisms driving participation from those underlying non-action. Practically, the results suggest that low levels of participation in collective action do not necessarily indicate apathy or indifference. Accordingly, strategies for social mobilization and policy interventions should take into account factors such as low political efficacy, social norms, and preferences for alternative forms of response, in order to avoid misdiagnosing the sources of non-participation.

Future research is encouraged to develop clearer operational definitions and measurement tools that differentiate between passive forms of inaction and deliberate or strategic non-participation. In addition, longitudinal research designs are needed to capture how inaction evolves over time and how it may transition into collective action under changing social and political conditions. Further studies should also examine a wider range of sociopolitical and cultural contexts, including contemporary forms of collective action such as digital activism, to advance a more comprehensive understanding of why individuals choose not to participate in collective action.

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