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Symbolic Action Motivates Further Collective Action by Increasing Identification With the Common Cause

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ABSTRACT

Publicly broadcasting one's support for a social cause is often maligned as 'slacktivism'. We investigate whether such symbolic action by advantaged group members in support of the cause of a disadvantaged group can motivate more concrete collective action when it solidifies a sense of belonging to a common cause. Across four preregistered studies (total $N = 1204$), voluntary (Studies 2 and 3), but not involuntary (Studies 1 and 4) symbolic action by advantaged group members increased opinion-based identification as part of a cause. This change in identification predicted increased collective action intentions and collective action in the form of donating to relevant charities. Moreover, in Study 3 we also found a significant indirect effect of symbolic action on collective action via increased identification. A competing hypothesis, that symbolic action might demotivate further action by reducing collective guilt, was not supported.

1 | Introduction

Social inequality is often considered to align with the self-interest of people who belong to advantaged groups, leading them to resist social change that benefits disadvantaged groups (Adler 1966; Branscombe et al. 2007; Jost 2019; Kipnis 1972; Sidanius and Pratto 2003). However, from a social identity perspective (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Turner et al. 1987) 'self-interest' is inherently dynamic because it is determined by the intergroup context—such that people are motivated to act in the interest of a group when they identify with that group. Accordingly, in some circumstances people in advantaged groups will be motivated to act *in a collectively self-interested way* to pursue social change that benefits disadvantaged groups (Drury et al. 2003; Louis et al. 2019; Subašić et al. 2008). For example, a large body of research building on the common ingroup identity model

(Dovidio et al. 2007; Gaertner et al. 1993) has found that superordinate (higher-order) social identity salience can increase willingness to help those previously seen as being 'outgroup' (see Gaertner and Dovidio 2009 for a review). However, superordinate identities can, in the context of social inequality, potentially overpower the interests of disadvantaged groups (Dovidio et al. 2016; Ufkes et al. 2016). Moreover, these identities can lead to competition between subgroups over the nature of the superordinate group (Eggers et al. 2002; Wenzel et al. 2007), and this kind of shared self-interest can be perceived as less genuine by those from disadvantaged groups (Chaney et al. 2024).

Another kind of social identity that can lead to intergroup prosociality is *opinion-based identity* (McGarty et al. 2009). In this case a sense of social identity is formed based on a shared opinion or a common cause. A key difference between this kind of

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identity and superordinate identity is that it does not need to be inclusive of the material interests of the advantaged group. This potentially avoids some of the issues with superordinate identity discussed above (Radke et al. 2020). Moreover, opinion-based identities have the potential to be particularly potent in motivating collective action because they are tied to a specific cause and thus are more specific in terms of their identity *content*—accordingly, they have been described as forming ‘an intermediate stage between broad social categories and the activist groups’ (Bliuc et al. 2007, 21). Supporting this idea, there is an emerging body of empirical research which shows that opinion-based identity can predict cooperation across group boundaries (for a review see Monik and Parzuchowski 2024).

In the present paper we explore a novel way in which opinion-based group membership which supports a cause that advances disadvantaged groups might be fostered—by encouraging advantaged group members to engage in *symbolic action*.

1.1 | Symbolic Versus Concrete Action

We define symbolic action as publicly broadcasting one's support for a social cause (Kristofferson et al. 2014; Schumann and Klein 2015). An example of this kind of behaviour is a person changing their picture on their social media profile to an image representing a given cause (Kim 2015; Penney 2015; Wellman 2022), or posting a message of support online (Chou et al. 2020; Shalev et al. 2024). The key difference between symbolic action and other kinds of action towards a personal goal or collective cause is that the action intentionally *symbolises* something to an audience (i.e., that the person engaging in the action belongs to or supports a cause). In contrast, concrete action supporting a cause or a personal goal need not have any signifying purpose. For example, donating privately to a cause can be a form of collective action (Louis et al. 2019), but it is not necessarily symbolic if it is not intended to communicate any meaning to other people.

Action can of course be both symbolic and concrete, such as when a donation is made publicly. However, it can also be purely symbolic, such as when a person publicly states support for a cause without that act contributing in a concrete sense to the outcomes of that cause. Such purely symbolic action has often been conceptualised as ‘slacktivism’ (Chou et al. 2020; Schumann and Klein 2015) or ‘performative allyship’ (Grapin and Goldie 2025; Kutlaca and Radke 2023). However, purely symbolic action is not necessarily low-cost, as publicly broadcasting one's support for a cause may lead to serious consequences in some contexts. In other words, what makes action symbolic is not that it requires a certain level of effort or achieves a particular concrete goal, but rather that it has an intended social meaning.

In this paper we investigate whether symbolic action by advantaged group members may encourage further, more concrete collective action to benefit a disadvantaged group (e.g., Louis et al. 2019; Subašić et al. 2025) to the extent that it increases a sense of opinion-based identification with the cause. The specific role of symbolic action in facilitating this kind of identity, and the subsequent effects of this for action on behalf of disadvantaged groups, have not yet been empirically tested.

1.2 | Opinion-Based Identity Hypothesis

Symbolic action supporting a cause may increase opinion-based identification with that cause because acting in line with one's social identity in a visible way is a form of ‘self-verification’ (Chen et al. 2004; Swann 1987), proving to oneself and other ingroup members that (a) ‘this social identity is important to me’; and (b) ‘I am a good group member’ (Chen et al. 2004). According to the social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE), engaging in this kind of social identity *performance* (i.e., an action that visibly demonstrates identity-relevant norms) is predicted to strengthen social identity and mobilise further action (Klein et al. 2007). For example, research shows that people tend to highlight different social identities in different contexts (Barreto et al. 2003) in order to control their own social categorization (Hopkins and Greenwood 2013) and mobilise collectively (Verkuyten and Yildiz 2010). Furthermore, if symbolic action increases opinion-based identification with a cause that benefits a disadvantaged group, it is predicted that this will shape further collective action on behalf of that group. This is because the fate of the disadvantaged group is part of the *content* of such an opinion-based identity, meaning that disadvantaged group members are more likely to be seen as ‘ingroup’ by advantaged group members (Radke et al. 2020). Combining these predictions about symbolic action, opinion-based identity, and collective action leads to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1. *Engaging in symbolic action by supporting a cause that benefits a disadvantaged group will increase identification with that cause and, through this, increase subsequent collective action on behalf of the disadvantaged group.*

1.3 | Collective Guilt Hypothesis

Although symbolic action may promote collective action by increasing identification with a common cause, we also make a competing prediction: that symbolic action may *resolve* disadvantaged group members' feelings of collective guilt, *reducing* the likelihood of further action (see Figure 1 for these competing pathways). Research shows that collective guilt can motivate action to address intergroup inequality (Brown et al. 2008; Harth et al. 2008; Leach et al. 2006; Mallett et al. 2008; McGarty et al. 2005). Indeed, affective science more generally demonstrates that emotions are functional: they motivate us towards our goals and away from threats (Lang and Bradley 2010). In particular, guilt is a self-focused emotion that motivates reparative behaviour following a transgression (e.g., Amodio et al. 2007; Haidt 2003; Hutcherson and Gross 2011). Once they experience guilt, an individual can then down-regulate this unpleasant emotion by either engaging in problem-solving regulation strategies to correct the transgression or by changing how they appraise the situation. A central critique of symbolic action as ‘slacktivism’ is that it satisfies hedonic motives to feel good about oneself as an individual or a group member without achieving tangible outcomes or motivating further action—that it is in effect a ‘substitute’ for further action (Kristofferson et al. 2014; Schumann and Klein 2015).

Supporting this argument, research has shown that acting on collective guilt by making reparations can reduce collective

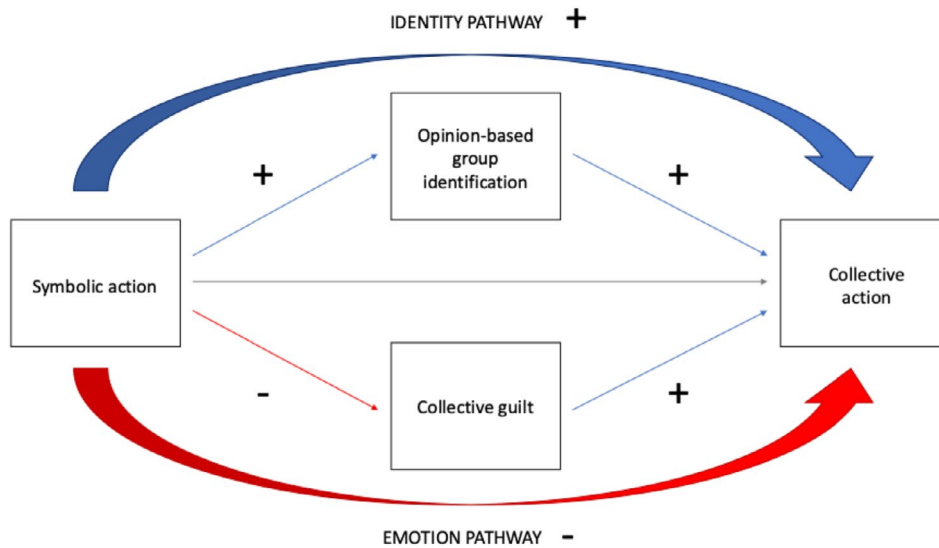


FIGURE 1 | Predicted indirect effects of symbolic action on collective action in support of disadvantaged groups.

guilt, thereby reducing motivation for further action (Maitner et al. 2006; Swim and Miller 1999). Similarly, prosocial behaviour in children has been shown to alleviate interpersonal guilt (Donohue and Tully 2019). Moreover, recent work has suggested that using reappraisal strategies to successfully reduce negative emotions can be unhelpful in instances where that emotion could have instead motivated more useful problem-solving actions (Ford and Troy 2019). For instance, following the 2016 US Presidential election, implementing reappraisal strategies helped restore Clinton-voters' emotional wellbeing, but did so at the cost of future collective action on behalf of their political group (Ford et al. 2019).

Accordingly, if engaging in symbolic action is *prompted* by a sense of collective guilt (i.e., this action is a form of emotion regulation), and the actor feels that this is a sufficient response to the emotion (i.e., through appraisal), this guilt will be alleviated. Because collective guilt can motivate action to address inequality between groups, to the extent that symbolic action reduces collective guilt it should also reduce further collective action to reduce inequality. This prediction can be formalised as follows:

Hypothesis 2. *Engaging in symbolic action in support of a cause which benefits a disadvantaged group will decrease collective guilt and, through this, decrease subsequent collective action on behalf of the disadvantaged group.*

We tested these competing hypotheses across four studies by first reminding participants about their privilege relative to a disadvantaged group in order to induce collective guilt (Branscombe et al. 2007; Powell et al. 2005), before assigning them (in Studies 1 and 4) or providing the opportunity (in Studies 2 and 3) to write a message of support for a cause benefiting the disadvantaged group. We measured whether engaging in symbolic action affected identification with the cause, collective guilt, and collective action in support of that group. Through these studies, we aimed to discover whether symbolic action might be a 'foot in the door' that encourages further collective action on behalf

of a disadvantaged group, and whether this is enough to overcome any ameliorating effect of such action on collective guilt.

All studies were preregistered on the OSF and quantitative data can be accessed at https://osf.io/dp825/?view_only=7d80a239ec6d443798da2c0969207e57. A priori power analyses (see Data S1) were conducted to determine sample sizes. No extra studies were conducted as part of the research program or excluded from this paper. Some exploratory variables that did not directly test our hypotheses have not been included in the present paper. Descriptive statistics for all studies are displayed in Table S1 in the [Supporting Information](#). Informed consent was obtained for all participants.

2 | Study 1

We recruited White American participants as representatives of an advantaged group relative to Black Americans. Symbolic action was manipulated experimentally by assigning participants either to write a message of support for racial equality (as in Schumann and Klein 2015), or to write about the weather in their local area. We were interested in whether engaging in this action would make participants more or less likely to engage in collective action in support of the cause of racial equality, operationalised as donating money to a relevant charity (as in Lee and Hsieh 2013; see also Louis et al. 2019). The Study 1 preregistration can be found at: https://osf.io/bc9t2?view_only=db7894be13a0405399f896216ccfcb7b.

2.1 | Method

2.1.1 | Participants

We recruited 299 White American participants from the United States (54% female, $M_{age} = 37.15$, $SD_{age} = 13.05$) via Prolific on 25th June 2019. Demographic screening provided by Prolific was used to ensure that participants were based in the United

States and self-identified as being White. Participants were paid £0.80 to complete an online survey described as focusing on social inequality in the United States of America.

2.1.2 | Design and Procedure

Study 1 employed a 2-level (Action Type: Symbolic Action, Control) between-participants experimental design. Participants were first asked how important they thought racial equality in the United States was. Next, they completed a privilege awareness task adapted from Powell et al. (2005), which involved reading 10 statements emphasising the privileges White Americans have relative to Black Americans (e.g., ‘In 2016, White American households had 10 times the wealth of Black American households (\$171,000 to \$17,100), a larger gap than in 2007’).

Next, participants were randomly allocated to write either an anonymous message of support for ‘a growing movement which aims to address social inequality in America’ (Symbolic Action condition), or about the weather in their local area (Control condition). Participants in the Symbolic Action condition were told their message would be posted online ‘on a blog dedicated to improving social inequality in America’. Next, participants completed measures of social identification with the cause of racial equality in the United States and collective (White American) guilt, then were invited to complete a donation task (i.e., the collective action measure). Finally, participants completed an open-ended naivety check and demographic items. The researchers donated money to the charities in accordance with participants’ choices.

2.1.3 | Materials and Measures

2.1.3.1 | Equality Attitudes. We included a single self-report item (‘It is important to ensure that all Americans are given equal opportunities, regardless of race’), scored from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

2.1.3.2 | Opinion-Based Group Identification. We used a 4-item measure (e.g., ‘Being a member of a movement that supports racial equality in America is an important part of how I see myself’) adapted from Postmes et al. (2013), scored from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), $\alpha = 0.95$.

2.1.3.3 | Collective (White American) Guilt. We used a 7-item scale (e.g., ‘I feel guilty about ‘White Americans’ harmful actions towards Black Americans’) adapted from Powell et al. (2005), scored from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), $\alpha = 0.93$.

2.1.3.4 | Collective Action. Collective action on behalf of Black Americans was measured using a donation task. Participants were asked to choose one of several charities that they would like the researchers to donate USD\$0.50 to (i.e., not their participation payment): Race Equality Foundation, The Salvation Army, World Vision, Refugees International, or The Red Cross, or to make no donation. The instruction for this task was phrased as follows: ‘Please select which charity you would like the experimenters to donate to’. Descriptions of these charities

provided to participants are included in the [Supporting Information](#). Participants’ choices were transformed to a binary variable, where 1 = donating to the cause-relevant charity (Race Equality Foundation) and 0 = not donating to the cause-relevant charity.

2.1.3.5 | Attention Check. The item: ‘This is an attention check. Please select ‘Strongly disagree’ for this item’ was included amongst the collective guilt measures.

2.1.3.6 | Naivety Check. Participants responded to an open-ended naivety check at the end of the questionnaire (‘What do you think this survey was about?’).

2.2 | Results

2.2.1 | Analytic Strategy

We used model 4 of the PROCESS macro for R (version 4.4.3; Hayes 2022) with 10,000 bootstrapped resamples to test for indirect effects of Action Type on collective action via increased opinion-based group identification and reduced collective guilt. Action Type (0 = Control, 1 = Symbolic Action) was entered as the predictor variable, identification and guilt as parallel mediators, and collective action (0 = not donating to Race Equality Foundation, 1 = donating to Race Equality Foundation) as the outcome variable. As the dependent variable was binary, the indirect effect coefficients were expressed as log-odds. All reported regression coefficients are unstandardized.

2.2.2 | Preliminary Analyses

Five participants failed the attention check. As removal of these participants did not change the overall pattern of results, they were included in the final sample. No participants articulated either of the two main research hypotheses in response to the open-ended naivety check. Preregistered analyses were re-rerun controlling for equality attitudes, but as these did not change the pattern of results, they are not reported here.

2.2.3 | Baseline Comparisons

Two-sample *t*-tests were conducted using the ‘stats’ package in R (version 4.4.3) to compare the Action Type conditions on key variables. The Symbolic Action (M 's = 6.60; 5.27; 4.61; SD's = 0.88; 1.68; 1.72) and Control (M 's = 6.65; 5.18; 4.60; SD's = 0.93; 1.58; 1.70) groups did not differ on their equality attitudes, $t(296.31) = 0.47$, $p = 0.640$, identification, $t(295.8) = -0.45$, $p = 0.652$, or guilt, $t(296.95) = -0.03$, $p = 0.980$.

2.2.4 | Preregistered Analyses

Contrary to the opinion-based group identification hypothesis (Hypothesis 1), there was no significant indirect effect of Action Type on collective action via identification (IE = 0.05, SE = 0.12, 95% CI: -0.180, 0.293). Although identification predicted increased collective action, $b = 0.58$, SE = 0.16, $p < 0.001$, engaging in symbolic action did not significantly predict identification,

$b=0.09$, $SE=0.19$, $p=0.652$. Contrary to Hypothesis 2, although guilt predicted increased collective action, $b=0.41$, $SE=0.14$, $p=0.003$, there was no significant indirect effect of Action Type on collective action via guilt ($IE < 0.01$, $SE=0.09$, 95% CI: $-0.181, 0.183$) as engaging in symbolic action was unrelated to guilt, $b=0.01$, $SE=0.20$, $p=0.980$. There was no significant direct effect of Action Type on collective action, $b=0.25$, $SE=0.29$, $p=0.339$.

2.2.5 | Exploratory Analyses

To better understand the relationships between Action Type, identification and guilt, and collective action, we conducted a series of regression and correlation analyses using the ‘stats’ package in R (version 4.4.3). Bivariate regression analyses revealed that Action Type did not predict identification, $b=0.09$, $SE=0.19$, $p=0.652$, or guilt, $b=0.01$, $SE=0.20$, $p=0.980$. Identification predicted significantly increased collective action, $b=0.11$, $SE=0.01$, $p < 0.001$, as did guilt, $b=0.11$, $SE=0.01$, $p < 0.001$. Action Type did not predict increased collective action, $b=0.27$, $SE=0.26$, $p=0.290$. Zero-order correlations between these variables are shown in Table 1 below.

2.3 | Discussion

Study 1 showed that both opinion-based identification and collective guilt predicted increased collective action. However, the symbolic action task (writing a message of support for the

cause) did not affect either identification or guilt, and thus we did not find support for either predicted pathway (see Figure 2). Moreover, there was no direct effect of symbolic action on collective action.

A limitation of this study was that we *instructed* participants to engage in symbolic versus control action rather than allowing them to choose. This procedure may have either undermined participants’ identification (Haslam et al. 2014) or their sense of engaging in an identity performance (Barreto et al. 2003; Hopkins and Greenwood 2013; Klein et al. 2007; Verkuyten and Yildiz 2010), thereby neutralising any effects on opinion-based identification or collective guilt. To address this limitation, in Study 2 we modified our paradigm to allow participants to choose whether or not to engage in symbolic action.

3 | Study 2

In Study 2, we gave participants the option to engage in symbolic action or an equivalent, unrelated action. This allowed us to address a key limitation of Study 1, in which symbolic action was manipulated. We also used a pre-post design, measuring the key self-report variables before and after participants completed the symbolic or control action. This allowed us to control for participants’ baseline levels of identification and guilt, meaning that we could estimate the *change* in identification and guilt after participants completed their chosen activity (symbolic action or control action). In addition, we conducted this study with a different population, recruiting undergraduate students (all Australian

TABLE 1 | Study 1 bivariate correlations between Action Type, guilt/identification, and collective action.

	Action Type	Identification	Guilt	Collective action
Identification	0.03			
Guilt	<0.01	0.73**		
Collective action	0.06	0.41**	0.41**	

Note: * Indicates correlations significant at $p < 0.05$, ** indicates correlations significant at $p < 0.001$.

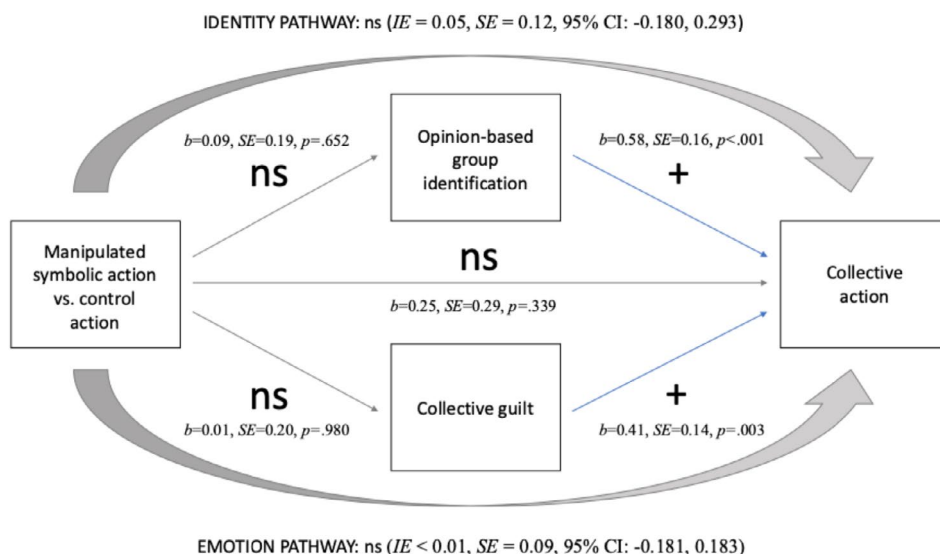


FIGURE 2 | Study 1 results regarding hypothesized pathways and direct effect of symbolic action.

citizens) from Australian universities. The disadvantaged group was refugees and asylum seekers, who represent a marginalised and mistreated minority group in Australian society (Minns et al. 2018). The Study 2 preregistration can be found at: https://osf.io/dvn95?view_only=3a9437e352ac4ccc8d0384220534d541.

3.1 | Method

3.1.1 | Participants

Between August and November 2020, we recruited 304 undergraduate psychology students from two Australian universities (71% female, $M_{\text{age}} = 20.30$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 4.29$) via research participation programs. Participants received course credit to complete a task described as examining people's attitudes towards refugees and asylum seekers.

3.1.2 | Design and Procedure

The study employed a 2-level (Action Type: Symbolic Action, Control) between-participants quasi-experimental design. The procedure was largely the same as in Study 1, with three key changes: (1) stimuli and items were adapted to fit the context (i.e., Australian citizens as the advantaged group and refugees and asylum seekers as the disadvantaged group); (2) opinion-based group identification and collective guilt were measured before (T1) and after (T2) the action; and (3) action type was self-selected, with participants given the choice to write a message of support (to be posted online 'on a blog dedicated to improving conditions for refugees and asylum seekers') or to write about the weather in their local area.

3.1.3 | Materials and Measures

3.1.3.1 | Attitudes Towards Refugees and Asylum Seekers. We included two items ('Australia should take on refugees and asylum seekers from other countries', and 'Australia should allow refugees and asylum seekers to live in the community') scored from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Participants responded to these items before choosing whether to engage in symbolic action or the control action.

3.1.3.2 | Opinion-Based Group Identification. Identification with the cause of supporting refugees and asylum seekers was assessed with a 4-item scale (e.g., 'Being a member of a movement that supports refugees and asylum seekers is an important part of how I see myself') adapted from Postmes et al. (2013) and scored from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), $\alpha_{\text{Time1}} = 0.92$, $\alpha_{\text{Time2}} = 0.95$.

3.1.3.3 | Collective (Australian) Guilt. We used a 7-item scale (e.g., 'I feel guilty about Australians harmful actions towards refugees and asylum seekers') adapted from Powell et al. (2005) and scored from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), $\alpha_{\text{Time1}} = 0.90$, $\alpha_{\text{Time2}} = 0.93$.

3.1.3.4 | Attention Check. A single-item attention check ('This is an attention check. Please select 'Strongly

disagree' for this item') was included amongst the T2 collective guilt measures.

3.1.3.5 | Collective Action. Participants were asked to choose one of several charities (Direct Relief, Friends of the Earth, Equality Now, Refugees International, or The Fred Hollows Foundation) that they would like the researchers to donate AUD\$0.50 to, or to not donate to any of these charities. Participants' choices were transformed to a binary variable, where 1 = donating to the cause-relevant charity (Refugees International) and 0 = not donating to the cause-relevant charity.

3.1.3.6 | Naivety Check. We included an open-ended naivety check at the end of the questionnaire ('What do you think this survey was about?').

3.2 | Results

3.2.1 | Analytic Strategy

We used model 4 of the PROCESS macro for R (version 4.4.3; Hayes 2022) with 10,000 bootstrapped resamples to test for indirect effects of Action Type on collective action via change in opinion-based group identification and collective guilt from T1 to T2. Action Type (0 = Control, 1 = Symbolic Action) was entered as the predictor variable, T2 identification and guilt as parallel mediators, T1 identification and guilt as covariates, and collective action (0 = not donating to Refugees International, 1 = donating to Refugees International) as the outcome variable. As the dependent variable was binary, the indirect effect coefficients were expressed as log-odds. All reported regression coefficients are unstandardized.

3.2.2 | Preliminary Analyses

Forty-nine participants failed the attention check and four correctly guessed the main research hypotheses. All analyses were run with and without these participants. As removal of these participants did not change the overall pattern of results, they were included in the final sample. 194 (63.82%) participants chose to engage in symbolic action, with 110 (36.18%) choosing to write about the weather in their local area. Preregistered analyses were re-rerun controlling for attitudes towards refugees and asylum seekers, but as these did not change the pattern of results, they are not reported here.

3.2.3 | Baseline Comparisons

Two-sample *t*-tests were conducted using the 'stats' package in R (version 4.4.3) to compare the Action Type conditions on key variables. Participants in the Symbolic Action condition ($M = 6.19$, $SD = 1.05$) were significantly more supportive than participants in the Control condition ($M = 5.09$, $SD = 1.33$) regarding refugee and asylum seeker intake, $t(186.04) = -7.42$, $p < 0.001$. Participants in the Symbolic Action condition ($M = 6.38$, $SD = 0.96$) were also significantly more supportive than participants in the Control condition ($M = 5.53$, $SD = 1.37$) regarding refugee and asylum seeker housing,

$t(170.98) = -6.11, p < 0.001$. Participants in the Symbolic Action condition ($M = 5.54, SD = 1.19$) were significantly higher in opinion-based identification than participants in the Control condition at T1 ($M = 4.34, SD = 1.29$), $t(210.84) = -7.98, p < 0.001$. Participants in the Symbolic Action condition ($M = 5.72, SD = 1.09$) were also significantly higher in collective guilt than participants in the Control condition at T1 ($M = 4.73, SD = 1.08$), $t(227.82) = -7.62, p < 0.001$.

3.2.4 | Preregistered Analyses

Contrary to the opinion-based group identification hypothesis (Hypothesis 1), there was no significant indirect effect of Action Type on collective action via change in identification ($IE = 0.08, SE = 0.12, 95\% CI: -0.141, 0.322$). Although engaging in symbolic action (vs. writing about the weather) predicted increased T2 identification, $b = 0.38, SE = 0.07, p < 0.001$, T2 identification did not predict collective action, $b = 0.22, SE = 0.26, p = 0.414$. Contrary to the collective guilt hypothesis (Hypothesis 2), there was no significant indirect effect of Action Type on collective action via change in guilt ($IE = 0.01, SE = 0.08, 95\% CI: -0.129, 0.181$). Engaging in symbolic action predicted *greater* T2 guilt (contrary to Hypothesis 2), $b = 0.20, SE = 0.06, p < 0.001$, but T2 guilt did not predict collective action, $b = 0.03, SE = 0.33, p = 0.916$. There was a marginally significant direct effect of Action Type on collective action, $b = 0.61, SE = 0.34, p = 0.073$. In these analyses we controlled for T1 identification and guilt.

3.2.5 | Exploratory Analyses

To better understand the relationships between Action Type, T2 identification and T2 guilt, and collective action, we conducted a series of regression and correlation analyses using the ‘stats’ package in R (version 4.4.3). Bivariate regression analyses revealed that Action Type predicted significantly increased T2 identification, $b = 1.48, SE = 0.14, p < 0.001$, as well as significantly increased T2 guilt, $b = 1.18, SE = 0.14, p < 0.001$. T2 identification predicted significantly increased collective action, $b = 0.11, SE = 0.02, p < 0.001$, as did T2 guilt, $b = 0.10, SE = 0.02, p < 0.001$. Engaging in symbolic action (vs. writing about the weather) predicted increased collective action, $b = 0.24, SE = 0.05, p < 0.001$. Zero-order correlations between these variables are shown in Table 2 below.

3.3 | Discussion

Findings from Study 2 were similar to those of Study 1: there were no indirect effects of symbolic action on collective action via change in opinion-based group identification or collective guilt (see Figure 3). However, the cause of these null results in Study 2 was different. Specifically, we found that participants who engaged in the symbolic action task experienced more collective guilt and identification afterwards relative to their baseline levels than participants who wrote about the weather. However, these significant changes in guilt and identification did not predict collective action.

TABLE 2 | Study 2 bivariate correlations between Action Type, T2 guilt/identification, and collective action.

	Action Type	T2 identification	T2 guilt	Collective action
T2 identification	0.51**			
T2 guilt	0.45**	0.76**		
Collective action	0.25**	0.32**	0.26**	

Note: * Indicates correlations significant at $p < 0.05$, ** indicates correlations significant at $p < 0.001$.

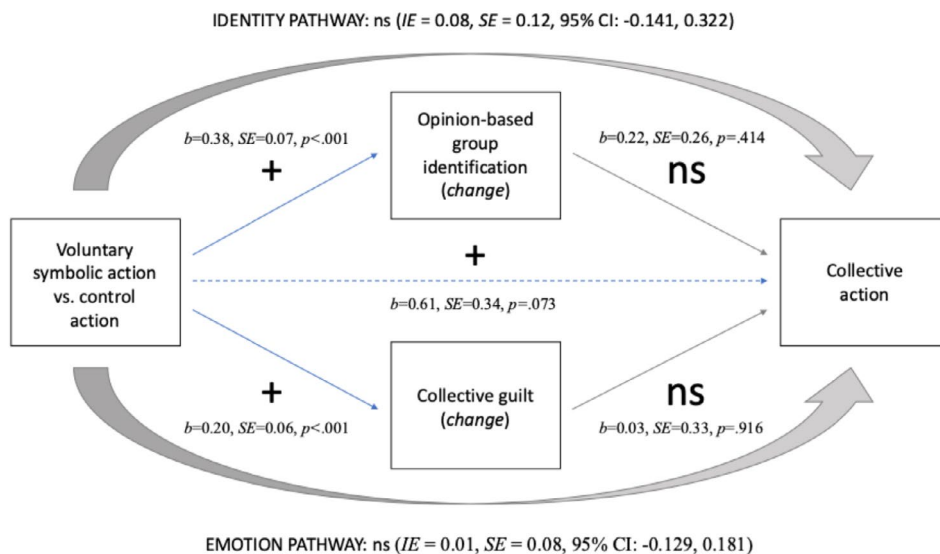


FIGURE 3 | Study 2 results regarding hypothesized pathways and direct effect of symbolic action.

Putting the results of these studies together, there is some evidence to support the identity pathway (Study 1: identification predicted an increased likelihood of collective action; Study 2: symbolic action predicted increased identification). However, the evidence for the guilt pathway in these studies suggests the *opposite* indirect effect to that predicted by Hypothesis 2 (Study 1: guilt predicted an *increased* likelihood of collective action; Study 2: engaging in symbolic action predicted *increased* guilt). Notably, in Study 2, choosing to engage in symbolic action (vs. writing about the weather) predicted increased collective action. This effect was not found in Study 1 when participants were randomly allocated to engage in symbolic action or a control action.

One limitation of both Study 1 and 2 was that in these studies we conceptualised collective action purely in terms of whether money was donated to the relevant cause or not. As such, it is not clear whether participants considered this to be collective action. Moreover, any null effects in these studies may have been caused by a weak relationship between intentions and actions, rather than a lack of any effects on intentions. To address this limitation, we conducted another study with the same population, including measures of collective action intentions as an additional and continuous outcome variable.

4 | Study 3

Study 3 was a replication of Study 2 with the same population, design, and procedure. To capture a broader conception of collective action, we included measures of collective action intentions and commitment to the cause. The Study 3 preregistration can be found at: https://osf.io/6jpc7?view_only=3b976887f144436aab2b5f99e08a0975.

4.1 | Method

4.1.1 | Participants

Between March–November 2021, we recruited 393 undergraduate psychology students from an Australian university (68% female, $M_{\text{age}} = 19.89$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 3.49$) via a research participation program. Participants received course credit for completing a task described as examining people's attitudes towards refugees and asylum seekers.

4.1.2 | Design and Procedure

The study employed a 2-level (Action Type: Symbolic, Control) between-participants quasi-experimental design. The procedure was the same as in Study 2.

4.1.3 | Materials and Measures

We included the same measures as in Study 2 of attitudes towards refugees and asylum seekers (measured before symbolic/control action), opinion-based group identification ($\alpha_{\text{Time1}} = 0.89$, $\alpha_{\text{Time2}} = 0.93$), collective (Australian) guilt ($\alpha_{\text{Time1}} = 0.92$,

$\alpha_{\text{Time2}} = 0.94$), attention and naivety checks, and collective action.

4.1.3.1 | Collective Action Intentions. We included a 6-item scale which asked participants how likely they were to engage in a number of collective actions (e.g., 'Join peaceful protests to highlight the need to support refugee and asylum seekers in Australia') adapted from Thomas et al. (2014) and scored from 1 (*very unlikely*) to 7 (*very likely*), $\alpha = 0.87$.

4.1.3.2 | Commitment to the Cause. We used a 2-item self-report scale (e.g., 'I feel responsible to support refugees or asylum seekers offline') adapted from Schumann and Klein (2015) and scored from 1 (*very unlikely*) to 7 (*very likely*), $\alpha = 0.84$.

4.2 | Results

4.2.1 | Analytic Strategy

Analyses were conducted in the same way as in Study 2. All reported regression coefficients are unstandardized.

4.2.2 | Preliminary Analyses

Fifty-one participants failed the attention check and five responded to the open-ended naivety check by articulating the main research hypotheses. As removal of these participants did not change the overall pattern of results, they were included in the final sample. 246 (62.60%) participants chose to engage in symbolic action, with 146 (37.15%) choosing to write about the weather in their local area. Preregistered analyses were re-rerun controlling for attitudes towards refugees and asylum seekers, but as these did not change the pattern of results, they are not reported here.

4.2.3 | Preregistered Analyses

4.2.3.1 | Collective Action. Providing evidence for the opinion-based group identification hypothesis (Hypothesis 1), there was a significant, positive indirect effect of Action Type on collective action via change in identification ($IE = 0.19$, $SE = 0.09$, 95% CI: 0.038, 0.384). That is, engaging in symbolic action (vs. writing about the weather) resulted in greater T2 identification, $b = 0.33$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < 0.001$, and T2 identification predicted increased collective action, $b = 0.57$, $SE = 0.22$, $p = 0.009$. Contrary to the collective guilt hypothesis (Hypothesis 2), there was no significant indirect effect of Action Type on collective action via change in guilt ($IE = -0.02$, $SE = 0.04$, 95% CI: -0.120 , 0.061). Although engaging in symbolic action resulted in *greater* T2 guilt (contrary to Hypothesis 2), $b = 0.16$, $SE = 0.07$, $p = 0.021$, T2 guilt did not predict collective action, $b = -0.11$, $SE = 0.21$, $p = 0.604$. There was a significant direct effect of Action Type on collective action such that engaging in symbolic action predicted increased likelihood of collective action, $b = 0.76$, $SE = 0.28$, $p = 0.007$. In these analyses we controlled for T1 identification and guilt.

4.2.3.2 | Collective Action Intentions. Providing evidence for the opinion-based group identification hypothesis

(Hypothesis 1), there was a significant, positive indirect effect of Action Type on collective action intentions via change in identification ($IE=0.10$, $SE=0.04$, 95% CI: 0.025, 0.187). That is, engaging in symbolic action (vs. writing about the weather) resulted in greater T2 identification, $b=0.33$, $SE=0.07$, $p<0.001$, and T2 identification predicted an increased intention to engage in collective action on behalf of refugees and asylum seekers, $b=0.30$, $SE=0.09$, $p=0.001$. Contrary to the collective guilt hypothesis (Hypothesis 2), there was no significant indirect effect of Action Type on collective action intentions via change in guilt ($IE=0.02$, $SE=0.02$, 95% CI: -0.016 , 0.071). Engaging in symbolic action resulted in *greater* T2 guilt (contrary to Hypothesis 2), $b=0.16$, $SE=0.07$, $p=0.021$, although T2 guilt did not predict collective action intentions, $b=0.11$, $SE=0.09$, $p=0.210$. There was a significant direct effect of Action Type on collective action intentions such that engaging in symbolic action predicted increased collective action intentions, $b=0.38$, $SE=0.11$, $p=0.001$. In these analyses we controlled for T1 identification and guilt.

4.2.3.3 | Commitment to the Cause. Providing evidence for the opinion-based group identification hypothesis (Hypothesis 1), there was a significant, positive indirect effect of symbolic action on commitment to the cause via change in identification ($IE=0.18$, $SE=0.05$, 95% CI: 0.087, 0.297). That is, engaging in symbolic action (vs. writing about the weather) resulted in greater T2 identification, $b=0.33$, $SE=0.07$, $p<0.001$, and T2 identification predicted increased commitment to the cause, $b=0.56$, $SE=0.09$, $p<0.001$. Contrary to the collective guilt hypothesis (Hypothesis 2), there was a significant, *positive* indirect effect of Action Type on commitment to the cause via change in guilt ($IE=0.05$, $SE=0.03$, 95% CI: 0.004, 0.126). That is, engaging in symbolic action resulted in *greater* T2 guilt (contrary to Hypothesis 2), $b=0.16$, $SE=0.07$, $p=0.021$, and T2 guilt predicted an increased commitment to the cause, $b=0.34$, $SE=0.09$, $p<0.001$. There was no significant direct effect of Action Type on commitment to the cause, $b=0.17$, $SE=0.11$, $p=0.138$. In these analyses we controlled for T1 identification and guilt.

4.2.4 | Exploratory Analyses

To better understand the relationships between Action Type, T2 identification and T2 guilt, and collective action, we conducted a series of regression and correlation analyses using the ‘stats’ package in R (version 4.4.3). Bivariate regression

analyses revealed that Action Type predicted significantly increased T2 identification, $b=1.27$, $SE=0.13$, $p<0.001$, as well as significantly increased T2 guilt, $b=0.92$, $SE=0.13$, $p<0.001$. T2 identification predicted significantly increased collective action, $b=0.08$, $SE=0.02$, $p<0.001$, collective action intentions, $b=0.71$, $SE=0.04$, $p<0.001$, and commitment to the cause, $b=0.75$, $SE=0.04$, $p<0.001$. T2 guilt also predicted significantly increased collective action, $b=0.06$, $SE=0.02$, $p<0.001$, collective action intentions, $b=0.64$, $SE=0.04$, $p<0.001$, and commitment to the cause, $b=0.72$, $SE=0.04$, $p<0.001$. Engaging in symbolic action (vs. writing about the weather) predicted increased collective action, $b=0.22$, $SE=0.05$, $p<0.001$, collective action intentions, $b=1.23$, $SE=0.13$, $p<0.001$, and commitment to the cause, $b=1.12$, $SE=0.14$, $p<0.001$. Zero-order correlations between these variables are shown in Table 3 below.

4.3 | Discussion

Findings from Study 3 largely replicated those of Study 2, with a few exceptions. Notably, the indirect pathway via social identity (Hypothesis 1) was fully supported in Study 3—not only for collective action (see Figure 4), but also for collective action intentions and commitment to the cause. Participants who chose to engage in symbolic action became more strongly identified with the cause, and this change in identification predicted greater collective action and commitment to the cause.

However, the indirect pathway via collective guilt (Hypothesis 2) was not supported for collective action or for collective action intentions and was in the opposite direction for commitment to the cause. That is, engaging in symbolic action resulted in *greater* collective guilt (as in Study 2), which in turn predicted increased commitment to the cause.

A shared limitation of Studies 1, 2, and 3 was that all participants completed a privilege awareness task. This was done so that there was a baseline level of collective guilt to be impacted on by symbolic action. However, it is possible that this procedure may have contaminated either the manipulation of symbolic action (in Study 1) or participants’ choice to engage in symbolic action (Studies 2 and 3), such that any effects on the dependent variables might only emerge when accompanied by privilege awareness. We aimed to address this key limitation and others such as the lack of a manipulation check for symbolic action in Study 4.

TABLE 3 | Study 3 bivariate correlations between Action Type, T2 guilt/identification, collective action, collective action intentions, and commitment to the cause.

	AT	Identity	Guilt	Action	Intentions	Comm.
Identity	0.45**					
Guilt	0.33**	0.69**				
Action	0.23**	0.25**	0.18**			
Intentions	0.42**	0.70**	0.61**	0.22**		
Comm.	0.37**	0.71**	0.65**	0.21**	0.65**	

Note: * Indicates correlations significant at $p<0.05$, ** indicates correlations significant at $p<0.001$. ‘AT’ stands for ‘Action Type’, while ‘Comm’ stands for ‘Commitment to the cause’.

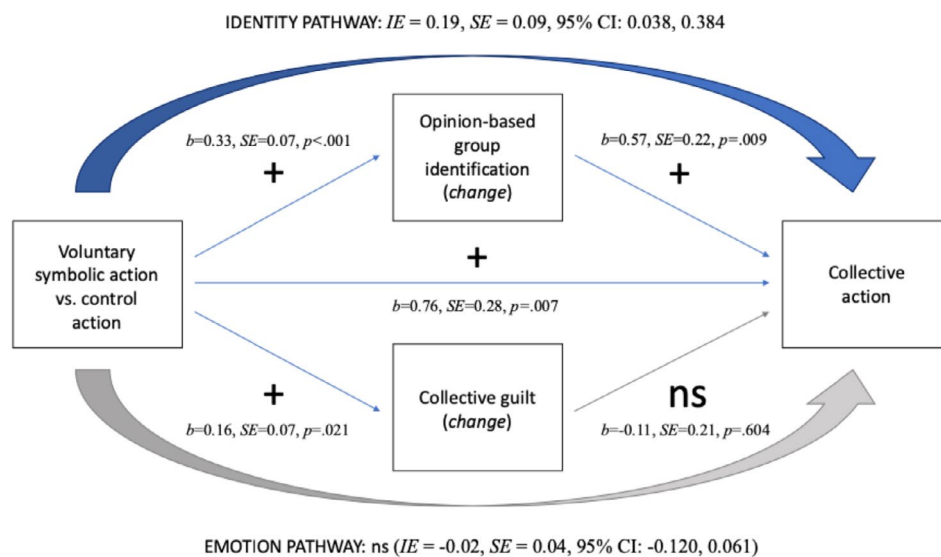


FIGURE 4 | Study 3 results regarding hypothesized pathways and direct effect of symbolic action on collective action.

5 | Study 4

Study 4 was intended to both address the limitations of the previous studies in several key ways, and also to extend the research program as a whole. In this study, privilege awareness was manipulated experimentally to account for the potential contaminating effect of the privilege awareness task on any effects of symbolic action. This addressed a shared limitation of all the previous studies. We also included a manipulation check for symbolic action to ensure that participants indeed perceived this action to be symbolic, addressing another issue shared with all previous studies. Another potential issue with Studies 2 and 3 was that one of the non-cause options for donation was ‘Equality Now’, which participants may have mistakenly identified as relevant to the cause. This option was replaced with a more obviously unrelated option for Study 4. A final issue of Studies 2 and 3, that of potentially evoking moral consistency bias by asking participants about their attitudes towards the issue of refugees and asylum seekers before the manipulation, was addressed by removing these items.

Moreover, we aimed to further generalise the results of Studies 2 and 3 by sampling from the general population of Australian residents rather than just undergraduate students (focusing on collective action in support of refugees and asylum seekers), while still manipulating symbolic action experimentally to provide a comparison with Study 1 in the Australian context. In Study 4, we also controlled for participants’ political orientation. The Study 4 preregistration can be found at: https://osf.io/vg2wt/?view_only=d9d9401cd7a24d0da65c013e87d7da5f.

5.1 | Method

5.1.1 | Participants

We recruited 208 Australian participants (54% female, $M_{age} = 39.93, SD_{age} = 13.28$) via Prolific on 21st May 2025. Participants were paid £2.89 to complete an online survey

described as focusing on Australian residents’ attitudes towards refugees and asylum seekers.

5.1.2 | Design and Procedure

The study employed a 2 (Action Type: Symbolic Action, Control) x 2 (Privilege Awareness: No, Yes) between-participants experimental design. Participants were first randomly allocated either to read 10 statements about refugees and asylum seekers in Australia (Privilege Awareness condition) or not (No Privilege Awareness condition). The statements were based on those in Studies 2 and 3, with updated statistics (e.g., ‘As of 31 December 2024, the average amount of time people spent in detention facilities was 467 days—the equivalent of 1.3 years’). This addressed limitations in previous studies, in which privilege awareness was made salient to all participants and may have interacted with the other manipulations. Manipulating privilege awareness as an independent variable allowed us to control for this possibility in Study 4.

Participants were then randomly allocated either to write a message of support for ‘a growing movement which aims to improve conditions for refugees and asylum seekers who seek to gain entry to Australia’ (Symbolic Action condition), or to write about the weather in their local area (Control condition). This allowed for a more direct comparison with Study 1, in which symbolic action was also manipulated rather than self-selected. As in Studies 2 and 3, participants completed T1 self-report measures before and T2 self-report measures after engaging in symbolic vs. control action. After writing the passage, participants completed a manipulation check (‘Writing the passage demonstrates my support for refugees and asylum seekers’; 1 = *strongly disagree*, to 7 = *strongly agree*). Following this, participants completed the same measures of collective action (including donation) as in Studies 2 and 3. However, the non-cause related donation option ‘Equality Now’ was replaced with ‘RSPCA’ (The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals).

5.1.3 | Materials and Measures

We included the same measures as in Studies 2 and 3 of opinion-based group identification ($\alpha_{\text{Time1}}=0.93$, $\alpha_{\text{Time2}}=0.96$), collective (Australian) guilt ($\alpha_{\text{Time1}}=0.93$, $\alpha_{\text{Time2}}=0.94$), attention and naivety checks, and collective action on behalf of refugees and asylum seekers.

5.1.3.1 | Collective Action Intentions. We included the same measure of collective action intentions as in Study 3, $\alpha=0.92$.

5.1.3.2 | Commitment to the Cause. We included the same measure of commitment to the cause as in Study 3, $\alpha=0.94$.

5.1.3.3 | Political Orientation. Political orientation was measured with a single self-report item ('Political orientations are often classified on a left-right spectrum. Please indicate your political orientation') scored from 1 (*strongly left leaning*) to 5 (*strongly right leaning*).

5.1.3.4 | Manipulation Check. A single self-report item ('Writing the passage demonstrates my support for refugees and asylum seekers') was included after the Action Type manipulation, scored from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

5.2 | Results

5.2.1 | Analytic Strategy

The analyses of indirect effects testing our main hypotheses were conducted in the same way as in Studies 2 and 3. Moderated mediation (to check for the effect of the privilege awareness manipulation) was tested using model 7 of the PROCESS macro for R (version 4.4.3; Hayes 2022) with 10,000 bootstrapped resamples. Action Type (0=Control, 1=Symbolic Action) was entered as the predictor variable, T2 identification and guilt as parallel mediators, T1 identification and guilt as covariates, Privilege Awareness (0=No,

1=Yes) as a moderator, and collective action (0=not donating to Refugees International, 1=donating to Refugees International) as the outcome variable. As the dependent variable was binary, the indirect effect coefficients were expressed as log-odds. Preregistered analyses were re-rerun controlling for participants' political orientation, but as these did not change the pattern of results they are not reported here. All reported regression coefficients are unstandardized. The results of the identification and guilt pathways regarding Hypotheses 1 and 2 are shown in Figure 5.

5.2.2 | Baseline Comparisons

Two-sample *t*-tests were conducted using the 'stats' package in R (version 4.4.3) to compare the Action Type conditions on key variables. The Symbolic Action (M 's=4.30; 4.62; SD 's=1.55; 1.39) and Control (M 's=4.18; 4.49; SD 's=1.66; 1.58) groups did not differ on their T1 identification, $t(205.59)=-0.55$, $p=0.583$, or guilt, $t(203.66)=-0.61$, $p=0.546$.

5.2.3 | Preliminary Analyses

Two participants failed the attention check and five responded to the open-ended naivety check by articulating the main research hypotheses. As removal of these participants did not change the overall pattern of results, they were included in the final sample. A between-participants *t*-test indicated that the manipulation of symbolic action was successful, $t(206)=-14.06$, $p<0.001$, $M_{\text{SymbolicAction}}=4.82$, $SD_{\text{SymbolicAction}}=1.68$, $M_{\text{Control}}=1.77$, $SD_{\text{Control}}=1.44$.

5.2.4 | Preregistered Analyses

5.2.4.1 | Collective Action. Contrary to the opinion-based group identification hypothesis (Hypothesis 1), there was no significant indirect effect of Action Type on collective action via change in identification ($IE=-0.03$, $SE=0.05$, 95% CI: -0.149, 0.070). That is, engaging in symbolic action (vs. writing about

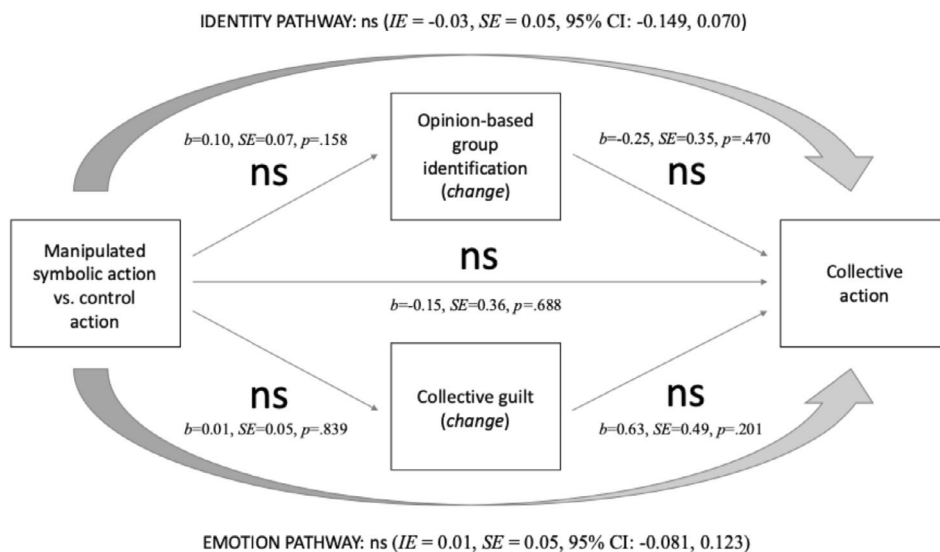


FIGURE 5 | Study 4 results regarding hypothesized pathways and direct effect of symbolic action on collective action.

the weather) did not predict T2 identification, $b = 0.10$, $SE = 0.07$, $p = 0.158$, and T2 identification did not predict collective action, $b = -0.25$, $SE = 0.35$, $p = 0.470$. Contrary to the collective guilt hypothesis (Hypothesis 2), there was no significant indirect effect of Action Type on collective action via change in guilt ($IE = 0.01$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% CI: $-0.081, 0.123$). That is, engaging in symbolic action (vs. writing about the weather) did not predict T2 guilt, $b = 0.01$, $SE = 0.05$, $p = 0.839$, and T2 guilt did not predict collective action, $b = 0.63$, $SE = 0.49$, $p = 0.201$. There was no significant direct effect of Action Type on collective action, $b = -0.15$, $SE = 0.36$, $p = 0.688$. The index of moderated mediation by Privilege Awareness for the identification pathway was non-significant ($IE = -0.01$, $SE = 0.07$, 95% CI: $-0.155, 0.161$). Privilege Awareness did not moderate the effect of Action Type on T2 identification, $b = 0.05$, $SE = 0.15$, $p = 0.724$. The index of moderated mediation by Privilege Awareness for the guilt pathway was also non-significant ($IE = 0.11$, $SE = 0.13$, 95% CI: $-0.051, 0.445$). Privilege Awareness did not moderate the effect of Action Type on T2 guilt, $b = 0.18$, $SE = 0.11$, $p = 0.101$. In these analyses we controlled for T1 identification and guilt.

5.2.4.2 | Collective Action Intentions. Contrary to the opinion-based group identification hypothesis (Hypothesis 1), there was no significant indirect effect of Action Type on collective action intentions via change in identification ($IE = 0.05$, $SE = 0.04$, 95% CI: $-0.021, 0.120$). While T2 identification predicted significantly higher collective action intentions, $b = 0.46$, $SE = 0.15$, $p = 0.002$, engaging in symbolic action did not significantly predict T2 identification, $b = 0.10$, $SE = 0.07$, $p = 0.158$. Contrary to the collective guilt hypothesis (Hypothesis 2), there was no significant indirect effect of Action Type on collective action intentions via change in guilt ($IE < 0.01$, $SE = 0.02$, 95% CI: $-0.038, 0.054$). That is, engaging in symbolic action (vs. writing about the weather) did not predict T2 guilt, $b = 0.01$, $SE = 0.05$, $p = 0.839$, and T2 guilt did not predict collective action intentions, $b = 0.33$, $SE = 0.20$, $p = 0.103$. There was no significant direct effect of Action Type on collective action intentions, $b = -0.16$, $SE = 0.16$, $p = 0.318$. The index of moderated mediation by Privilege Awareness for the identification pathway was non-significant, ($IE = 0.02$, $SE = 0.07$, 95% CI: $-0.120, 0.175$). Privilege Awareness did not moderate the effect of Action Type on T2 identification, $b = 0.05$, $SE = 0.15$, $p = 0.724$. The index of moderated mediation by Privilege Awareness for the guilt pathway was also non-significant ($IE = 0.06$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% CI: $-0.022, 0.187$). Privilege Awareness did not moderate the effect of Action Type on T2 guilt, $b = 0.18$, $SE = 0.11$, $p = 0.101$. In these analyses we controlled for T1 identification and guilt.

5.2.4.3 | Commitment to the Cause. Contrary to the opinion-based group identification hypothesis (Hypothesis 1), there was no significant indirect effect of Action Type on commitment to the cause via change in identification ($IE = 0.06$, $SE = 0.04$, 95% CI: $-0.026, 0.150$). While T2 identification predicted significantly higher commitment to the cause, $b = 0.58$, $SE = 0.14$, $p < 0.001$, engaging in symbolic action (vs. writing about the weather) did not significantly predict T2 identification, $b = 0.10$, $SE = 0.07$, $p = 0.158$. Contrary to the collective guilt hypothesis (Hypothesis 2), there was no significant indirect effect of Action Type on commitment to the cause via change in guilt ($IE < 0.01$, $SE = 0.01$, 95% CI: $-0.032, 0.023$). That is, engaging in symbolic action (vs. writing about the weather) did

not predict T2 guilt, $b = 0.01$, $SE = 0.05$, $p = 0.839$, and T2 guilt did not predict collective action intentions, $b = 0.17$, $SE = 0.19$, $p = 0.367$. There was no significant direct effect of Action Type on commitment to the cause, $b = -0.24$, $SE = 0.15$, $p = 0.108$. The index of moderated mediation by Privilege Awareness was non-significant for the identification pathway, ($IE = 0.03$, $SE = 0.09$, 95% CI: $-0.137, 0.221$). Privilege Awareness did not moderate the effect of Action Type on T2 identification, $b = 0.05$, $SE = 0.15$, $p = 0.724$. The index of moderated mediation by Privilege Awareness for the guilt pathway was also non-significant, ($IE = 0.03$, $SE = 0.04$, 95% CI: $-0.026, 0.134$). Privilege Awareness did not moderate the effect of Action Type on T2 guilt, $b = 0.18$, $SE = 0.11$, $p = 0.101$. In these analyses we controlled for T1 identification and guilt.

5.2.5 | Exploratory Analyses

To better understand the relationships between Action Type, T2 identification and T2 guilt, and collective action, we conducted a series of regression and correlation analyses using the 'stats' package in R (version 4.4.3). Bivariate regression analyses revealed that Action Type did not predict T2 identification, $b = 0.23$, $SE = 0.23$, $p = 0.322$, or T2 guilt, $b = 0.13$, $SE = 0.21$, $p = 0.524$. T2 identification predicted significantly increased collective action, $b = 0.12$, $SE = 0.02$, $p < 0.001$, collective action intentions, $b = 0.86$, $SE = 0.05$, $p < 0.001$, and commitment to the cause, $b = 0.83$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < 0.001$. T2 guilt predicted significantly increased collective action, $b = 0.16$, $SE = 0.02$, $p < 0.001$, collective action intentions, $b = 0.88$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < 0.001$, and commitment to the cause, $b = 0.84$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < 0.001$. Action Type did not predict collective action, $b = -0.01$, $SE = 0.07$, $p = 0.843$, collective action intentions, $b = 0.02$, $SE = 0.26$, $p = 0.947$, or commitment to the cause, $b = -0.06$, $SE = 0.24$, $p = 0.817$. Zero-order correlations between these variables are shown in Table 4 below.

5.3 | Discussion

Regarding the preregistered analyses, the results of Study 4 did not support either the identification or guilt pathway. Specifically, engaging in symbolic versus control action did not predict a significant change in identification or guilt from T1 to T2, while change in these variables from T1 to T2 did not predict collective action. However, exploratory analyses investigating bivariate relationships revealed a pattern resembling Study 1 (in which symbolic action was also manipulated rather than chosen by participants). As in Study 1, identification and guilt measured *after* the Action Type manipulation (i.e., at T2) predicted increased collective action; however, engaging in symbolic versus control action did not affect these variables. Given that this study had a similar design to Study 1, but in an Australian context, these results help to clarify that involuntary symbolic action does not change identification in the way that voluntary symbolic action did in Studies 2 and 3.

The manipulation check indicated that the symbolic action task was seen by participants as demonstrating their support for the cause, while the test of moderated mediation indicated that the privilege awareness task did not contaminate the symbolic action manipulation. Controlling for political orientation did not change the pattern of results.

TABLE 4 | Study 4 bivariate correlations between Action Type, T2 guilt/identification, collective action, collective action intentions, and commitment to the cause.

	AT	Identity	Guilt	Action	Intentions	Comm.
Identity	0.07					
Guilt	0.04	0.79**				
Action	-0.01	0.43**	0.51**			
Intentions	<0.01	0.78**	0.72**	0.39**		
Comm.	-0.02	0.79**	0.72**	0.44**	0.80**	

Note: * Indicates correlations significant at $p < 0.05$, ** indicates correlations significant at $p < 0.001$. 'AT' stands for 'Action Type', while 'Comm' stands for 'Commitment to the cause'.

6 | General Discussion

While symbolic action by privileged people is often dismissed as 'slacktivism', the present research suggests that in some conditions it can motivate advantaged group members to act further on behalf of disadvantaged groups. Across all studies, and in line with previous literature (Bliuc et al. 2007; McGarty et al. 2009; Monik and Parzuchowski 2024), zero-order analyses revealed that opinion-based identification predicted increased collective action (donation to a cause-relevant charity), collective action intentions, and commitment to the cause. By using a behavioural measure of collective action and extending the concept of opinion-based identity to the issues of race relations and refugees and asylum seekers, the present paper contributes to literatures that focus on harnessing the action of advantaged group members such as charitable giving (e.g., Chapman et al. 2020) and social change (e.g., Selvanathan et al. 2020). In particular, these findings highlight opinion-based identity as a means to motivate advantaged group members towards equality without some of the issues created by superordinate identities (Banfield and Dovidio 2013; Dovidio et al. 2007; Radke et al. 2020).

Moreover, regarding the role of symbolic action as a potential way to foster this kind of opinion-based identity, we found evidence that engaging in symbolic action can *increase* opinion-based group identification with the cause the action supports when this is chosen as an alternative to a control action (Studies 2 and 3). However, randomly allocating participants to engage in symbolic action versus a control action (Studies 1 and 4) did not have this effect. One explanation for this finding is that choosing to engage in symbolic action reflects autonomous motivation in that it reflects personal goals and values, whereas being assigned to engage in symbolic action is experienced as controlled motivation reflecting external pressure (Ryan and Deci 2000). Thus, when symbolic action is autonomously motivated, it may be experienced as an identity performance more than when it is controlled. Accordingly, the lack of effects of symbolic action on identification in Studies 1 and 4 could be because participants did not see this action as a true reflection of their own goals and values. This interpretation of our results aligns with findings from a longitudinal study by Yip et al. (2024), who found that autonomous motivation predicted increased opinion-based identity, and though this collective action, but that controlled motivation *negatively* predicted opinion-based identity. Indeed, this might also explain the differences between the results of the present studies and

those of Schumann and Klein (2015), who found that manipulated symbolic action did not predict further action through group identification. However, this interpretation remains speculative as motivation was not measured in the present studies.

Regardless, the findings of Studies 2 and 3 contribute to the literature on opinion-based identity by identifying a novel way in which such identities can be fostered—an area which has received relatively little attention (Monik and Parzuchowski 2024). However, it is important to note that full causal inference cannot be drawn here due to the quasi-experimental nature of Studies 2 and 3. Indeed, analyses of baseline variables showed that participants who were higher in identification, guilt, and support for the cause were more likely to choose to engage in symbolic action, indicating that this choice was not independent of existing attitudes and emotions. However, the results of the preregistered analyses showing that symbolic action predicted an *increase* in identification from T1 to T2 (Studies 2 and 3) suggest that symbolic action, freely chosen, can play a *causal role in intensifying identification with the cause*.

Finally, in Study 3, there was an indirect effect of (voluntary) symbolic action on further collective action via increased opinion-based group identification, supporting the full pathway of Hypothesis 1. This indirect effect was not found in Studies 1 and 4 due to the lack of impact of manipulated symbolic action on identification, and in Study 2 due to the lack of impact of identification on collective action. The latter finding is at odds with the literature on opinion-based identity—and indeed contradicts the zero-order relationship between identification and collective action in the same study. It may be that the change in identification was not enough in Study 2 to predict collective action, but that this pattern may have been present for behavioural intentions (which were more strongly related to identification in Studies 3 and 4), were these measured in this study.

Together, these results provide initial support for the hypothesis that symbolic action can be a catalyst for further action by increasing a sense of psychological connection to the cause that the action supports. This points towards the potential for symbolic action, opinion-based identity, and collective action to form a 'virtuous cycle' that increases commitment to the cause and action on behalf of that cause (e.g., Drury et al. 2005; Klein et al. 2007; Thomas et al. 2016). Indeed, symbolic action may be an important initial step in moving from passive support to an active, politicised identity (Bliuc et al. 2007).

Our results did not support the competing hypothesis that symbolic action might alleviate collective guilt and thus reduce motivation to engage in future action. In line with previous literature (Brown et al. 2008; Harth et al. 2008; Leach et al. 2006; Mallett et al. 2008; McGarty et al. 2005), zero-order analyses revealed that collective guilt predicted increased collective action, collective action intentions, and commitment to the cause across all studies. However, the pattern of findings suggested that symbolic action does not reduce collective guilt and can even result in *greater* collective guilt (i.e., in Studies 2 and 3). This increase in guilt following symbolic action was independent of identification, indicating that there was another pathway through which this emotional change operated. One possible explanation for this could be that writing a message of support without receiving any reply from the recipient (i.e., indicating their gratitude or forgiveness; Riek et al. 2014) might have increased guilty participants' *rumin*ation (Ferguson and Crowley 1997; Riek 2010). In other words, it may be that 'one-way' symbolic action in the present studies did not feel like *enough* of a contribution to alleviate guilt, and that writing about the issue instead sustained participants' distress by keeping it in the front of their minds (Afifi et al. 2013).

This finding has implications for the broader literature on symbolic action. Specifically, there are inconsistent findings in the literature relating to the question of whether symbolic action increases or reduces further action (N. Kim et al. 2024; Kristofferson et al. 2014; Lane and Dal Cin 2018; Lee and Hsieh 2013; Moussaoui et al. 2022; Schumann and Klein 2015). This suggests that more needs to be done to understand the mechanisms through which initial action translates into further action. Previous literature has tended to compare the relative weight of moral licensing or crediting (reducing further 'moral' action; e.g., Cornelissen et al. 2013; N. Kim et al. 2024) with consistency effects (increasing further, 'consistent' action; Lane and Dal Cin 2018; Lee and Hsieh 2013). The results of the present study point to *emotion* as an important and underexplored potential moderator of these dynamics.

The present paper makes an important theoretical contribution by bringing symbolic action research together with social psychological literatures on collective action, intergroup emotions, and social identity. In particular, although symbolic action has been criticised as 'performative allyship' (Matsick et al. 2020), this performative aspect may have the benefit of psychologically tying advantaged group members to causes that benefit disadvantaged groups. In a world where structural inequalities and intergroup conflict cause immense problems for societies, groups, and individuals (Al Ramiah and Hewstone 2013; Carroll et al. 2011), the present research suggests that symbolic action may therefore be a small but important step on the way to rebalancing and redistributing power by creating and solidifying identification with causes that benefit disadvantaged groups.

Moreover, our findings have applied implications. Notably, forcing people to engage in symbolic action is unlikely to be effective in encouraging further action via opinion-based identity. Our results suggest that such involuntary symbolic action may not constitute a genuine identity performance and thus will not reflect back onto the self in a meaningful way. However, offering group members the opportunity to engage in symbolic action to

an audience may help to encourage further action. An important question for future research to address is whether freely chosen but socially influenced symbolic action (e.g., symbolic action resulting from 'peer pressure') shapes opinion-based identity in a similar manner to less influenced action. To the extent that such pressure is internalised as a function of group identification, such that it is experienced as coming from 'within the social self'; and to the extent that the resulting symbolic action is performed for a meaningful ingroup, this may still shape opinion-based identification even if it is not experienced as reflecting personal autonomy.

6.1 | Strengths, Limitations, and Future Research

Our research program combined both experimental (Studies 1 and 4) and quasi-experimental designs (Studies 2 and 3). The former design allows for strong causal inference and internal validity, while the latter increases external validity and psychological reality. However, both these designs also have weaknesses in the current context. Specifically, experimentally manipulating symbolic action is problematic because it undermines the autonomous motivation which is critical for opinion-based identification and further action (Yip et al. 2024). Indeed, we see the lack of significant results in Studies 1 and 4, relative to those in Studies 2 and 3, as a central contribution of the present paper. However, although the quasi-experimental designs used for Studies 2 and 3 involved measurement of identification and guilt pre- and post-symbolic action, they did not allow for the stronger causal inference of experimental designs. Accordingly, we have referred explicitly to *change* in identity and guilt in these studies.

Another strength of the present research was that it included a behavioural measure of collective action (donation to a relevant charity; see Louis et al. 2019), supplemented with collective action intentions in Studies 3 and 4. The results for these measures followed a similar pattern (see Table S2 in the supplemental materials), providing some convergent validity for our behavioural measure of collective action. However, a limitation of the way we operationalised collective action was that although participants chose where the money was spent, they did not spend their own money. Using a paradigm where participants are invited to donate their own money, time, or energy would be a more direct way of testing whether they were willing to share their power with the cause and, by extension, the disadvantaged group.

A limitation of Study 1 in particular was that, for the symbolic action task, participants were asked to write a message of support for a movement addressing 'social inequality in America'. This is problematic as the privilege induction, guilt and identification items, and the relevant donation option related to *racial* (in)equality, meaning that the symbolic action task was not precisely matched to the rest of the study. We addressed this in the following studies (including Study 4, which also manipulated symbolic action) by more closely linking the symbolic action task to the same cause as the rest of the procedure. Furthermore, in Studies 1, 2, and 3 there was an issue of potential contamination of the symbolic action manipulation. Specifically, the privilege awareness task was completed by all participants, which meant that any effects of symbolic action on the dependent variables represented privilege awareness + symbolic/control action. To

address this issue, we manipulated privilege awareness in Study 4, finding that it did not moderate any of the hypothesized indirect effects.

Given the similarity in method and samples between Studies 2 and 3, it is not immediately clear why the effect of opinion-based group identification on collective action (controlling for guilt) was significant in Study 3 but not in Study 2. Because the effect of opinion-group based identification predicting increased collective action was found in Studies 1 and 3, and has been reported in the literature more broadly (Bliuc et al. 2007; Musgrove and McGarty 2008; Subašić et al. 2008; van Zomeren et al. 2011), it is important for future research to investigate the conditions under which increased opinion-based identification *fails* to motivate further action. The social identity model of collective action identifies group-based anger and group efficacy beliefs as factors which work with group identification to predict collective action (Van Zomeren et al. 2008, 2011), and the role of these factors in increasing the potency of the social identity processes underlying symbolic action is a useful avenue for future research.

Future research might also directly investigate whether autonomous versus controlled motivation moderates the effect of symbolic action on identification. In particular, it is important to identify whether the difference between voluntary and forced symbolic action on identification is due to different experiences of motivation and self-relevance. Accordingly, future studies might directly measure or manipulate these variables. Furthermore, it will be important to test the role of group identification in potentially moderating whether social pressure to engage in symbolic action is experienced as autonomous or controlled. This is relevant not only for theoretical understanding but also for effectively using symbolic action as a means to motivate further collective action.

7 | Conclusion

Our findings demonstrate that engaging in voluntary symbolic action in support of a cause benefiting disadvantaged groups can lead people from advantaged groups to feel more psychologically invested in that cause, thereby motivating further collective action. Indeed, rather than being a pressure valve for feelings of collective guilt, these results suggest that such symbolic action does not reduce and can even increase feelings of collective responsibility for the existence of intergroup inequality. Accordingly, encouraging (but not forcing) advantaged group members to engage in symbolic action is a promising method for motivating them further to act against what might initially appear to be their material self-interest by changing the meaning of ‘self’ to include causes that benefit disadvantaged groups. By making it psychologically easier for advantaged group members to act on behalf of disadvantaged groups, such symbolic action may therefore be a catalyst for social change.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in Open Science Framework at https://osf.io/dp825/?view_only=7d80a239ec6d443798da2c0969207e57.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section. **Data S1:** Supporting Information.