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Greta Thunberg and the transnational youth elite in global climate politics: myth or reality?

Abstract:

Greta Thunberg has gained increasing attention in global climate politics, in particular since the Fridays for Future movement she initiated in 2018. Attention has also come with criticism, denouncing her for being part of a transnational youth climate elite made up of privileged youth. However, does such an elite really exist, and what does it mean for global climate politics? This article investigates the profiles of youth participants in global climate politics to answer these questions. We define and analyze three potential youth climate elite groups: positional, decisional and reputational. We then examine whether individuals from these elite groups and/or their socio-demographic characteristics overlap. Our results show that no unique transnational youth climate elite exists. Most of all, more than elite or non-elite, we reveal the power hierarchies that persist regarding how youth is understood in global climate politics, at the detriment of a more inclusive and ambitious climate agenda

Introduction

Greta Thunberg has become a central figure of global climate politics. Attention on her is mostly related to the Fridays for Future (FFF) movement she initiated in 2018, by protesting every Friday in front of the Swedish Parliament instead of going to school, asking politicians for immediate and effective climate policy. Her strikes soon became a global phenomenon, and

millions of young people and their supporters joined the protest, asking governments for more robust and faster action to prevent the climate crisis. Activism soon invited itself at global climate summits and Greta Thunberg attended the 26th Conference of the Parties (COP26) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

While praised for its dynamism and straightforward engagement for climate ambition, herself and the youth climate movement she initiated have soon been criticized for embodying a limited fraction of youth. As a Swedish white girl, Greta Thunberg has soon been portrayed as privileged youth and youth marching for the climate in European cities have also been found to be mostly coming from well-educated families (de Moor *et al.* 2020). While Greta Thunberg's speeches have denounced the capitalist elite (Nordensvard and Ketola 2022), she herself has soon been labeled as part of the upper class (Jung *et al.* 2020), leading a transnational youth elite. This has had implications for the climate movement reception with backlash initiated by commentators, who, among others, have minimized the global scope and social dimensions of climate change (Jung *et al.* 2020, Duvall 2023).

This interpretation that the climate emergency be imposed by white European privileged youth activists poses at least two problems when confronted to scientific research: (i) while data is available on youth activism for punctual events at a precise point in time, no data exists on youth activism within global climate politics on the long term¹. Current characterizations of youth activism are therefore lacunary and cannot, so far, scientifically validate the existence of an elitist transnational youth climate movement; (ii) the current academic literature has been mostly focusing on climate protesters in specific geographical contexts (especially Europe and the United States), at the detriment of the analysis of youth within international environmental negotiations with a worldwide scope. Both lacunas are even more surprising that the number of youth participants in global climate negotiations under the UNFCCC COPs, “the forum at which global political action is negotiated, contested, agreed, and scrutinized” (Nisbet and Spaiser 2023), has significantly increased through time: while about 20 youth participated to COP1, more than 1,600 attended COP27. Trends show a long-term involvement of youth, also in formal policymaking (Orsini and Kang 2023).

¹ There is no unique definition of youth in global climate politics. On the one hand, YOUNGO, the official UNFCCC youth constituency accepts individuals until 35, while 16 is the minimum age required to participate in a climate COP (United Nations Climate Change Secretariat 2023, p. 14). On the other hand, the UN Secretary General Youth Climate Change Advisors must be between 15 and 29 at the time of appointment (Youth Envoy Office 2023). In this contribution, we combine both by using the 15-35 age range.

This article aims at filling both lacunas by delving into the identities of youth involved in global climate politics. It takes the analytical concept of elite seriously and asks whether a transnational youth elite on climate change exists, and what it means for global climate politics. It bridges insights from different social science sub-disciplines, such as media, diplomacy and social movement studies and apply them to the analysis of youth in international policymaking. Deconstructing the elite concept enables to reflect, from a youth-focused perspective, on the power dynamics that transcend global climate politics.

In the following, Section 1 presents a literature review on youth in global climate politics and on the concept of elite. Section 2 presents our methodology to identify and analyze youth elite groups in global climate politics. Section 3 presents our results by elite group. We then discuss the implications of our findings on youth for global climate politics and conclude.

1. Literature review: youth and elites in global climate politics

1.1. Who are youth in global climate politics?

Two existing streams of literature bring knowledge on youth in global climate politics: youth climate protests' studies and studies on youth participants in international climate negotiations.

Most research on youth in climate politics has covered youth protests (Neas *et al.* 2022). Because she has been initiating such protests, it has concentrated on the role of Greta Thunberg, who has become an outstanding figure of the movement with her innovative and limitless engagement for the climate cause (Jung *et al.* 2020, p. 11 & p. 14; Kolleck and Schuster 2022). Such studies have also centered on the broader FFF movement she launched. Given that FFF has grown substantially in the last five years, several studies have examined the identities (Brügger *et al.* 2020, Wouters *et al.* 2022), motives (de Moor *et al.* 2020, Pickard 2022), perceptions (Evensen 2019) and networks (Terren and Soler-i-Marti 2021, Nasrin and Fisher 2022) of FFF participants, especially at local and national levels. One landmark transnational study has moreover concentrated on the profiles of such youth: based on survey data collected from participants of FFF protests on 20-27 September 2019 in 19 cities worldwide, de Moor *et al.* (2020) have shown that participants were of rather young age compared to other protests and were highly educated. When asked to identify their social class, almost 42% of respondents considered themselves in the “upper middle class” and 5% in the “upper class”. In addition,

female participants have been found to be outnumbered, reinforcing the impression that the movement reflected Greta Thunberg's biographical profile.

Compared to studies of youth protests, studies on youth participation in international climate negotiations have been limited. YOUNGO, the official UNFCCC youth constituency² received particular research attention (Thew 2018, Yona *et al.* 2020, Thew *et al.* 2021, Kolleck and Schuster 2022; Marquardt *et al.* 2024), with studies showing how youth struggle to maintain a meaningful presence in international climate politics. Indeed, YOUNGO often lacks human resources and funding to sustain youth participation in negotiations and longer-term activities (Thew 2018). This leads to missing opportunities for genuine deliberation and collaboration of youth with state and other non-state actors (Thew *et al.* 2021). Furthermore, Kolleck and Schuster (2022), who conducted a social network analysis of online communications and networks of youth-related information during COPs 24–26, point out the central attention to Greta Thunberg: while she did not follow the formal negotiations in detail, her speeches resonated within the COPs.

Besides studies that concentrate on YOUNGO or on youth and social media during COPs, few insights exist about who the youth representatives involved in UNFCCC COPs are. Kolleck and Schuster (2022) state that youth participants at climate COPs are predominantly well-educated young adults, mirroring the composition of the youth climate protesters. Recent studies indicate that only a limited fraction of youth can bypass the material barriers to participate in climate COPs (Buhre and Josefsson 2025, Bullon-Cassis 2024). This does not mean that all youth are on the same page and Yona *et al.* (2020, p. 5) point out that “while there is a tendency to generalize youth as a group, (...) there are tensions within the YOUNGO constituency, as well as a wide range of access and resource availability.”

Both research streams on youth protests and on youth in international negotiations seem to suggest that youth in global climate politics constitute a very specific, privileged, group of individuals. In practice, both punctual research and media attention have created a slippery slope that has progressively assimilated youth into an elite group.

1.2. From youth against the elite to youth as elite

² Constituencies refer to organized groups admitted as observers to the UNFCCC conferences.

Dellmuth *et al.* (2022) define the elite as “people who hold leading positions in key organizations in society that strive to be politically influential” (p. 13, see also Hoffmann-Lange 2018, p. 79). To be able to lead and be politically influential, elites are typically equipped with material resources as well as information and broad networks that help them influence policy decisions in a society (Wedel 2017, Hoffmann-Lange 2018). Overall, the main understanding of the concept evolves around a socio-economic definition of the elite as both being wealthy and influential, as a sort of super-bourgeoisie (Cousin and Chauvin 2021) or a transnational class (Sklair 2002, Robinson 2011). In global environmental politics, such elite is traditionally associated with neo-liberal governments (Persha and Andersson 2014); more rarely with mainstream environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Holmes 2011).

In this context, youth and elites have generally been pictured as contrasting notions in global environmental politics (e.g. Collin 2015, O’Brien *et al.* 2018, Giugni and Grasso 2021). Youth have been described as actors “typically resisted, rejected, or ignored by the political elite and establishment” (O’Brien *et al.* 2018, p. 42). Greta Thunberg regularly denounces the governmental and economic elite for their irresponsible behavior in the face of the climate crisis (Fonseca and Castro 2022). Her speeches confirm “the recent backlash against political elites and big business, or the idea that ‘every billionaire is a policy failure’” (Papin and Beauregard 2024, p. 73). More generally, youth have been depicted as actors who question the status quo (Mattheis 2020).

Yet, another side of the story has gained increasing attention: that Greta Thunberg be part of the elite. Lan Yu explained that “the Chinese believe that Thunberg is a member of the global elite. Even when she was young and suffered from illness, there were more vulnerable groups and poorer people in the world” (Yu 2022, p. 273). As a white European from a wealthy country (Sweden), she has been labeled as a privilege youth by Global South commentators (Jung *et al.* 2020). Moreover, her reported activities indicate she can afford international travel costs, obtain visas, and speak several languages, including English, overcoming all the material barriers related to the participation to climate COPs (Buhre and Josefsson 2025). Her biographical background prompted criticism regarding her privileged position

She has also been found to be influential. Her speeches on climate change at key global conferences and her very focused communication on social media (Murphy 2021) have been carefully scrutinized, and brought her a level of fame similar to the ones of influential

policymakers and celebrities, while maintaining a strong ecological engagement (Murphy 2021, Nordensvard and Ketola 2022, Papin and Beauregard 2024). The idea of her being influential has also been exacerbated by the “Greta effect” (Taft 2020, Hayes and O’Neill 2021, Sabherwal *et al.* 2021), whereby many young people have followed her as a role model. She has been an iconic international figure, nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019, elected as a Times Magazine Personality the same year, and very active on social media, including Instagram and X (formerly Twitter) with millions of followers (Jung *et al.* 2020, Molder *et al.* 2022). She has been invited to speak at international events by economic and governmental elites, in an attempt to co-opt her ideologically (Morena 2023).

Designating who is the elite has implications for defining who has power - as elites are influential- and who does not. Labeling individuals as elites is therefore a crucial endeavor. Most experts agree that different types of elites exist, depending on the types of power they exercise. Among others, Steven Lukes’ three dimensions of power (2005), in decision-making, agenda-setting, and ideological shaping, help discuss whether some actors are labeled as elites because they exercise primarily procedural, thematic or symbolic power. In addition, the elite status is situational and reveals the “engagement regime” (Thévenot 2006) that others activate with regards to the elite, e.g. what type of influence is recognized by others. Identifying groups as the elite therefore also enables to identify “the weight some engagements are given at the expense of others” (Hansen 2023, p.6). For example, labeling Greta Thunberg as part to the elite mostly insist on her ideological shaping power to frame global climate issue as a Global North priority; and insist on her unique regime of justification.

However, the shift of narrative from ‘youth against the elite’ to ‘youth as the elite’, especially with regards to the whole youth climate movement, comes with a major uncertainty: youth have not yet been identified systematically in global climate politics, meaning that the debate on the existence of a youth elite and of its type of power relies on unproven expectations. To correct this gap, in the following, we detail a research protocol that, for the first time, proposes to confront the existing literature with detailed empirical data about youth in global climate politics.

2. Methodology: Defining and characterizing the youth climate elite from different angles

In line with the threefold dimensions of power and with the definition of elite as a specific group of people (Dellmuth 2022), three main methods have been used for elite group identification in elite studies: the positional, the decisional, and the reputational method (Hoffmann-Lange 2018³). The positional method is based on the assumption that formal positions such as elected or executive leadership positions have a particular influence in defining the trends of societies (agenda-setting). The decisional method investigates actors who are actively involved in important decision-making processes. Lastly, the reputational method identifies elites based on the extent to which they are referred to by knowledgeable observers (symbolic power) (Knoke 1993, Hoffmann-Lange 2018). While numerous studies have applied one of those methods, Knoke (1993) points out that keeping them separated is challenging, while it is advantageous to combine them for a comprehensive list of elite membership. We therefore operationalized and combined these methods to identify youth elites in global climate politics.

2.1. The positional climate youth elite: YOUNGO focal points and the UN Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change

To identify the positional youth climate elite, we concentrate on individuals who have occupied key youth representation positions at the international level. YOUNGO represents young individuals under 35 years and youth organizations within the framework of the convention. Created in 2009 (COP15), it is the oldest and the largest children and youth constituency in the UN environmental governance system (YOUNGO n.d.) but one of the most recent UNFCCC constituencies officially recognized together with “Farmers” and “Women and Gender” (UNFCCC Secretariat n.d.).

As of 2024, YOUNGO consists of over 1,000 youth organizations, youth-led or youth-serving, and more than 10,000 young individuals (YOUNGO n.d.). It has a horizontal structure, and members communicate via the official mailing list (YOUNGO 2022). However, its governance is headed by two volunteering focal points (one from the Global North and one from the Global South), who have a representation role. For this study, we made the list of all YOUNGO focal points through time (from 2009-2023, 27 individuals) to include in the positional climate youth elite group.

³ Santilli and Scaramuzzino (2024) concentrate on the organizational, reputational and visible elite, with organizational resembling positional, visible resembling reputational and reputational based on the reputation of influence. Here we chose the classification by Hoffmann-Lange as COPs are instances of decisions. We take from these categorizations the importance of recognizing the multiplicity of the elite concept.

Moreover, in 2020, the UN Secretary-General designated a UN Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change made of volunteering youth representatives to advise him on the climate agenda (UN n.d.). Seven youth representatives were selected for a two-year term. The group was renewed in 2023. Because the mandate of such individuals makes them politically influential in global climate politics, we included all 14 in the positional elite group that comprises 41 individuals in total.

2.2. The decisional youth climate elite as the most frequent youth participants in UNFCCC COPs

To identify the members of the decisional elite group, we analyzed the list of participants to the UNFCCC COPs, the main decision-making body of the climate convention. While most youth participants attend climate COPs as observers, they still have chances to influence negotiators via lobbying, socializing and protesting during the conferences (Allan 2020).

We built an inventory⁴ of all youth participants in UNFCCC COPs between 1995 and 2023, using both top-down and bottom-up data collection methods. The top-down method involves collecting official documents from the UNFCCC secretariat, particularly the official lists of participants to the COPs, which include the gender, name, affiliation, sub-affiliation, and title of participants. To make information more robust as official lists do not reflect last-minute participants, we complemented the information with a bottom-up approach using mainly the Earth Negotiations Bulletin (ENB)⁵ published by the International Institute for Sustainable Development as a reliable summary of real-time climate COP negotiations.

To identify youth among the lists, we searched organizations or participants which registration data included keywords related to youth, in different languages. We however eliminated students based in the countries where the COPs took place: we assumed the purpose of their participation to be learning for educational purposes, rather than youth political representation. Additionally, we developed a methodology to include youth without youth keywords in their registration data in the database. To do so, we collected the lists of organizations accredited to the UNFCCC Secretariat and to the UN Environment Programme under the youth constituency but without keywords in their names; as well a list of organizations affiliated with YOUNGO

⁴ For a more detailed explanation of the methodology see Orsini and Kang, 2023.

⁵ <https://enb.iisd.org/>.

in 2018. We searched back whether these organizations attended any climate COP through the official lists and ENB bulletins.

The most critical step in the elite identification process is setting the boundary of the elite group (Hoffmann-Lange 2018). We decided to use the frequency of participation in COPs as the delimiting criteria for the climate decisional elite: we included in this group the youth individuals who attended more than 5 climate COPs. This enabled to identify 43 youth individuals.

2.3. The youth climate reputational elite: analyzing youth in online media

Identifying a reputational youth climate elite was done in two ways. We used digitized media to identify the ‘reported elite’, a method that is gaining attention in elite studies (e.g. Hicks *et al.* 2015). It appeared particularly relevant due to the increasing digitalization of information. We used the Google search function to gather news articles and blogs, in English, that provided rankings of the most influential youth activists on climate issues worldwide. The keywords used for the search were ‘most+famous+youth+climate’ and ‘most+famous+climate+activists’. By doing so, we identified 53 individuals from 8 articles (see Annex).

In addition, we searched relevant news articles in major online English-speaking media by using keywords. *The Guardian*, *BBC*, and *Washington Post* were selected for this search as those are among the most trusted international outlets and accessible online. We used the Advanced Search function of Google to specify the search in these outlets and limited the period to 1995-2023 in accordance with the period used for the other elite groups. We analyzed the first 20 articles on the result page and picked up all the youth climate individuals mentioned in these articles. In total, 172 names were identified in the corresponding articles published between February 2018 and January 2023⁶. The digitized English-speaking media we chose, while biased as including linguistic and accessibility barriers, was considered effective to find internationally recognized elite climate youth individuals.

To obtain our final list of names for the youth reputational elite group, we merged the results from the two steps (rankings and newspapers) and classified the youth climate activists by their

⁶ The identified time period for the reputational youth appears recent, compared to other elite groups, showing it became an important media topic only after the 2018 climate youth protests.

frequency of appearance in the collected data. We selected those who appeared more than two times in our results. By doing so, we identified 36 individuals in the reputational elite group.

2.4. Characterizing the youth climate elite

The three methods enable to list the names of the individuals involved in the different elite groups. On this basis, we formulate two research hypotheses. First, if a transnational youth climate elite exists, we would expect a certain level of overlap to appear across the groups. On the one hand, all three groups rely on different measures and, as such, cover different dimensions of the youth climate elite in terms of power: the reputational youth are more likely to be ideology shapers while the positional youth agenda-setters and the decisional youth decision-makers. Moreover, youth in the media could be more “protest-oriented” youth who do not necessarily accept official mandates or the game of formal negotiations. On the other hand, several elements play in favor of overlap. First, it would make sense that official UN or YOUNGO mandates be awarded to youth with solid experience in international climate negotiations, creating overlap between the positional and the decisional elite. Along the same line, we could expect the most famous youth in online media to be the most present during international negotiations (being aware of the importance of climate change) or occupying positional mandates (having been identified by international institutions as key actors). However, because youth is a precarious category on the international scene – for instance all the mentioned positions for the positional youth elite are voluntary-, we also expect such overlap to be limited, as many resources are needed for actors to maintain their presence on the international scene.

Despite including different individuals, as a second hypothesis, we expect similarities between the socio-demographic characteristics of the youth from the three elite groups: we expect that they gather economically and socially privileged individuals. To test this hypothesis, we analyze three variables. First, we analyze the economic background of the identified youth individuals by coding the characteristics of their country of origin⁷, including UN regional

⁷ Nationality is often directly indicated in the media or short presentations of selected candidates for official positions. When it is not, we searched the online profiles of the identified individuals to get the needed information.

group, level of development⁸ and use of English as an official language⁹. It enables us to discuss their economic and social positioning, and more broadly to identify whether they come from the Global North or the Global South. We expect only youth with a certain privilege to be able to afford to participate in the elite groups, i.e. most youth in our elite groups would come from the Global North.

Second, based on the literature on youth protests, we select gender¹⁰ as another important socio-demographic variable. The distribution of this parameter is difficult to foresee. Women and girls are found to have been more active in climate protests, giving a feminine figure to climate activism (de Moor *et al.* 2020). However, at the international level, we expect the participation of women to be more difficult as shown by studies of governmental delegates in international settings (Hemmati and Röhr 2009, Women's Environment and Development Organization 2022). As a result, we expect fewer youth women to participate in climate change politics as male dynamics usually dominate international politics.

Third, we add age as an important socio-demographic criterion¹¹. Apart from the UN Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change (29 at application) and YOUNGO individual membership requirement (35), no age limits exist to represent youth on the international scene, for instance, within national delegations or youth-serving organizations. Just as for gender, age can reveal different power dynamics (Orsini *et al.* 2025). Most of the time youth are discredited for their young age through tokenism or 'youth washing' (Orsini and Kang 2023, Marquardt *et al.* 2024). We therefore expect the elite groups to be mostly formed by individuals who are situated at the upper end of the youth age bracket, as they need resource and expertise to follow international processes and would have more social capital than younger individuals.

We scrutinize both hypotheses on the basis of the profiles of the individuals identified in the three elite groups.

⁸ For level of development, the International Monetary Fund's 2022 World Economic Outlook country classification and the list of Least Developed Countries published by the UN Committee for Development Policy were used to categorize countries into three categories: developed, developing, and least developed. While there are many definitions of the Global South we define it as gathering developing and least developed countries.

⁹ English as official language is used as a proxy for social capital on the international scene, where most discussions happen in English.

¹⁰ Gender is often explicitly mentioned, though exclusively with a binary scale, in the list of COP participants, the media and in official presentations of mandate nominees.

¹¹ Age information is usually available in the media, but not in other sources. When online profiles did not indicate age, we calculated it based on the year of the first university diploma of the corresponding individuals.

3. Results: characterizing youth elite groups in global climate politics

3.1. Is there a unique transnational youth climate elite? Analyzing overlaps between youth elite groups

When comparing the names of the individuals involved in the three elite groups identified, only three instances of overlap appear: two individuals are part of the positional and decisional elite groups, and one individual is part of the decisional and reputational elite groups. Situations of overlap are therefore very rare. Moreover, no overlap exists across the three identified elite groups¹².

While we were not expecting complete overlap across the groups, this finding is rather extreme, indicating that the youth elite groups are highly dissimilar: youth occupying important representation positions are different individuals than the ones participating in the UNFCCC negotiations and are also different from youth mentioned in media. It seems that learning processes cannot easily happen across the three groups: youth who engage in official mandates are not necessarily the ones who have more experience of climate COPs. Youth mentioned in the media are not those occupying official mandates or participating in climate COPs.

Zooming out the three groups, one nuance can be brought to the reflection: nearly half of the youth reputational elite group (17 individuals) have already participated in one (13 individuals) or two (4 individuals) climate COPs. Five of these individuals have participated in COPs under an accreditation that was not youth-related, meaning they were not counted in our UNFCCC youth participation dataset. Among the 14 members of the UN Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change, 2 members attended more than 4 COPs, 7 members attended 2 COPs, 4 members attended 1 COP, and 1 member did not attend climate COPs until COP27. Because YOUNGO focal points also attend COPs, COPs are found to be a potential venue for the socialization of the different elite groups, even though the groups remain independent from one another in terms of individual members. The following sections question whether socio-demographic characteristics overlap across the identified individuals.

¹² To test the sensitivity of the boundaries of the elite groups, we analyzed the overlap between youth who attended 4 UNFCCC COPs and the other elite groups. Out of the 42 additional youth in the decisional group, none were found back in the reputational group and only 4 in the positional group (3 YOUNGO contact points; one UN advisory group), confirming overlap is rare.

3.2. Analyzing the socio-demographic characteristics of the different youth climate elite groups: origin, gender and age

Table 1 presents data on the country of origin of youth.

Table 1. Countries of origin of the youth elite groups according to UN regional groups, level of development and English as official language

	Positional	Decisional	Reputational
% Africa	16.19	30.23	19.44
% Asia-Pacific	22.29	13.95	22.22
% Eastern Europe	9.52	0.00	0.00
% Latin America and Caribbean	16.95	6.97	2.78
% Western Europe and other	35.05	46.51	61.11
% developed countries	35.71	51.16	63.89
% developing countries	50.00	32.56	25.00
% least developed countries	14.29	13.95	11.11
% with English as official language	64.29	53.49	86.11
Not found	/	2.32	/

Regarding UN regional groups, two extremes are visible in Table 1. First, the absence of Eastern Europe for the reputational and decisional elite groups. Second, Western Europe and other, that includes the United States (US), Canada, Australia and New Zealand, represents the UN region of almost half of the decisional group and much more than half of the reputational group. In the reputational group, Greta Thunberg is mentioned 45 times in the selected media, whereas the second most visible youth individuals are mentioned 10 times: Alexandria Villaseñor from the US and Vanessa Nakate from Uganda, illustrating a significant media attention gap between Greta Thunberg and other youth.

Africa is well represented in the decisional group, a group where there are also more youth from the Global South. This could be explained by the fact that some countries and NGOs have programs designed to support the participation of disfavored regions, including funding for youth participants from the Global South to attend international negotiations. Moreover, YOUNGO systematically elects one focal point from the Global South and one from the Global North. Overall, the positional elite group presents the most balanced distribution regarding

origin, the selection process of the UN Youth Climate Advisory Group also takes geographical balance into account, even though discrepancies are still visible.

Zooming on countries, the most represented within the reputational elite group are the US (11 individuals), India (5), the UK (4) and Uganda (4). Within the decisional group, the US, Germany and Canada, each represented by 5 individuals. Within the positional group, the UK (4), US (4), Brazil (2), India (2) and Nepal (2) are the only countries of origin appearing several times.

Results confirm that youth elite groups are formed around individuals mostly from the Global North, with an over-representation of Americans for reputational youth. For the decisional group, this can be explained by the high level of material resources and passport and visa access needed for on-site participation in the COP conferences held in different countries every year. Moreover, results show that being fluent in English is an important resource shared by most of the identified youth actors in global climate politics as two thirds come from countries recognizing English as an official language. The translation service into the 6 UN official languages is limited to the official negotiation sessions, hindering participants who do not have a good command of English from active participation in all the debates. Wealth and English language appear important for youth to appear in elite groups, even if youth from the Global South can still make it to some extent.

Regarding gender, clear differences appear: the women proportion is substantially higher than men in the reputational elite group (83.3%) compared to the positional (56.09%) and decisional elite groups (40.5%) (see Table 2).

Table 2. Gender of the youth participants of the elite groups

	Positional	Decisional	Reputational
% women	56.09	42.00	83.33
% men	43.90	58.00	16.66

For decisional youth, women are underrepresented, especially among the individuals who attended more than 8 COPs: out of 9 individuals, only 2 are women (22%). The positional group has the most balanced gender ratio compared to other groups, with a slightly higher rate of women. However, the picture changes when one looks at the first 10 individuals appointed as

YOUNGO focal points: 80% of them were men. Gender balance has appeared progressively over time in that group.

Resources appear again as a potential explanation for the lower number of women in the decisional group: as men are more powerful actors on the global scene (Walters 2024), it is easier for them to gather the necessary resources for participation (e.g., professional experience, money, passport and visa). However, the explanation is not valid for positional elite youth and reputational elite youth. For reputational youth, the percentage of women is even higher than observations of participants in the FFF protest globally: De Moor *et al.* (2020) found nearly 60% of protesters were identified as women while their percentage here is over 80%. The overrepresentation of women in the reputational group indicates that young women are made more “visible” to the public by the media to embody the climate emergency.

Table 3 presents the youth elite groups’ distribution according to age.

Table 3. Age of the youth participants of the elite groups

	Positional	Decisional	Reputational
Average age at the time of their enrolment in elite group	25.35	31.72	16.91
Individuals without age information (%)	9.75	16.27	00.00

Another critical difference appears between the reputational elite group and the other two groups regarding age: youth visible in the media are much younger. Interestingly, several individuals who have attended COP meetings did not qualify as youth when they attended their first COP, with some being even over 50. This has been particularly the case for national youth delegates coming from the Global South. Overall, youth participants in the decisional youth elite are experienced youth.

Discussion and Conclusion: youth climate activism and the hierarchies of power

This article has questioned whether a transnational youth climate elite exists and what its socio-demographic characteristics are, to verify its labeling as an influential, privileged, transnational class, following comments addressed to Greta Thunberg.

Results indicate that no unique transnational youth climate elite exists. The youth elite groups identified via the positional, decisional, and reputational methods in global climate politics hardly overlap: the groups include different individuals. In other words, climate change is not the exclusive concern of a handful of youth who circulate across the media and international institutions for influence, but of diverse youths worldwide. Moreover, origin, gender and age distribution differences exist across the groups, invalidating the idea of a uniform socio-demographic youth transnational class. The reputational elite group is particularly distinct from the others: in comparison, it has a significantly higher proportion of youth from the Global North, women, and very young individuals. It is therefore much less varied. These findings question the representativity of youth pictured in online English-speaking media, who are the most visible to the general public, compared to youth engaged in long-term climate negotiations, who are much less visible.

The gap between youth in the media and the other youth groups is likely to have negative implications for youth participation and power in global climate politics. First, biased attention to the reputational youth may result in an overemphasis on stereotypes of climate youth activism as performed by young girls in individual actions, at the expense of continuous efforts of youth around the world to participate formally in global climate processes (positional and decisional youth). While the engagement regimes (Thévenot 2006) of youth in the media insists on personal voice and authenticity (regimes of familiarity and exploration), the formal competence and negotiation skills in COP processes is an engagement regime that is given much less visible (regimes of planned action and justification). This can trigger frustration and fatigue within the larger group of youth climate activists who have considerable experience but still do not see their voices heard. Consequently, young people might try to give up on their youth identity and get involved in international negotiations through other constituencies, not representing youth (Thew *et al.* 2020, p. 24, Marquardt *et al.* 2024). Decisional and positional youth would deserve more attention than they currently have.

Second, the overemphasis on young women in the media might undermine the need for ambitious action in global climate politics. On the one hand, some analysts have indicated the positive effects of values associated with feminine figures, such as protection and care for others and the planet and girls' key role in climate justice (Walters 2024). On the other hand, others have indicated the risk, on the international scene, that women and girls be put at the forefront of attention regarding climate vulnerability issues, undermining the 'seriousness' of the climate

crisis, that in fact concerns humanity as a whole beyond gender differences (Flavell 2023). In any case, the profiles of the youth put in media headlines do not reflect the diversity of youth. Moreover, the high level of media attention to Greta Thunberg has led to divert attention from other youth. While she became a real eco-celebrity (Murphy 2021), always focused on her objective of strong sustainability and aware of the need to also speak for Global South youth (Fonseca and Castro 2022), there is a risk that other ‘fashionable’ youth take the attention away from the diversity of youth and somehow discredit the UN process (Ortiz 2022).

Third, picturing the youth climate movement in the media as a unique ‘feminine’ or ‘elitist’ movement from the Global North undermines the power of youth in climate politics by reducing the potential of the movement to grow with wide support. Our study confirms that most of the youth present in international processes have resources (in terms of language, level of development of country of origin) but the reality of their presence is much less simple than what the reputational elite group seems to indicate. In this regard, our research opens new avenues for exploring the biographical data of youth. Furthermore, the problem is that when referring to youth or contacting youth for official international events, international institutions and governments might favor the more visible reputational elite group, at the expense of others who in practice form more established and diverse youth groups. Decisional youth are already aware of the risk of such disproportionate attention. For instance, during our research, several youth participants from the Global North at COP26 & 27 refused interviews with us, suggesting colleagues from the Global South for these interviews, to correct the current biased attention towards Global North youth at these events.

To conclude, our study does not confirm interpretations according to which Greta Thunberg would be the leader of a unique transnational climate elite made at her own image. Instead, studying elite groups systematically emphasizes the diversity of youth engaged in global climate politics and the existing hierarchies pertaining to different youth groups. Such hierarchies exist in terms of age (some pictured as very young while all adults who deserve attention because of their expertise and experiences), gender (women being less represented in decisions but overrepresented in the media) and wealth (with the youth studied here being prominently privileged; and themselves caught into a Global North/Global South gap they try to rebalance). Our results on the hierarchies at play regarding youth confirm that non-climatic grounds, such as age or gender, can also slow down climate governance, by limiting the scope of civil society voices. Youth engagement in global climate politics is not simply a matter of

elite or non-elite status, but a dynamic negotiation across plural arenas of power and regimes of engagement. Reflecting on the existence of such hierarchies in academic research and media coverage of youth would do better justice to youth climate movements that are, despite their lack of visibility, perseverating to push for more ambitious climate action.

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Conflict of interest

There are no conflict of interest to declare for this research.

Data availability

We confirm that we have secured authorization to use the data included in this research.

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Annex. News articles and blogs listing or ranking the most influential youth climate activists in the world

Host website	Title		Date
Sustainability	Get to know the world's top five youth climate activists	https://sustainabilitymag.com/sustainability/faces-of-change-the-top-five-youth-climate-activists-named-greta-emissions-change-pledge	1/03/2022
Earth.org	10 Young Climate Activists Leading the Way on Global Climate Action	https://earth.org/young-climate-activists-leading-the-way-on-global-climate-action	12/08/2022
Unity College	16 Young Environmentalists Changing the World	https://unity.edu/hybrid-learning/16-young-environmentalists-changing-the-world/	10/08/2021
Independent	6 young climate activists making waves, who aren't called Greta Thunberg	https://www.independent.co.uk/climate-change/sustainable-living/greta-thunberg-burger-king-earth-indian-donald-trump-b1850074.html	27/05/2021
Greenhouse	10 youth climate activists who are finding novel ways to take action	https://www.greenhouse.agency/blog/10-youth-climate-activists-who-are-finding-novel-ways-to-take-action/	n.d.
Apolitical	100 Most Influential People in Climate 2022/23 – Youth	https://apolitical.co/list/en/most-influential-climate-100-2022	n.d.
International Rescue Committee	12 climate activists inspiring us to fight climate change	https://www.rescue.org/uk/article/12-climate-activists-inspiring-us-fight-climate-change	15/09/2021
Influencerintelligence	10 Climate Change Activists You Should Follow	https://www.influencerintelligence.com/blog/9G/10-climate-change-activists-you-should-follow	n.d.