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Youth communication in climate negotiations: A verbal, paraverbal, and non-verbal analytical framework



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ABSTRACT

This study investigates young negotiators' communication at the Conference of Parties (COPs) through a three-dimension analytical framework based on analysing verbal, paraverbal, and non-verbal communication in negotiations, including negotiation styles and thematic areas accessibility. Current literature covers aspects of youth participation at COPs, such as barriers, demographics, and case studies. Research on youth communication in these environments mainly focuses on public activism, protests, social media, or speeches such as Greta Thunberg's. Works on youth specifically involved in negotiation tables, focusing on their communication analysis, are still understudied. This study explores this area through a qualitative approach based on 26 semi-structured in-depth interviews with young negotiators and observers at COP29. Regarding verbal communication, findings suggest young negotiators appear to mainly employ Storytelling and Factual styles, seeming to mismatch adult negotiators' styles, who appear to mainly apply Factual, Analytical and Normative. A thematic marginalisation of youth is perceived, with youth accessing climate justice themes, such as Children and Youth, and Education, while encountering more difficulties negotiating technical thematic areas, such as Carbon Market. This may suggest possible intergenerational inequity and structural barriers to equal accessibility and participation. Paraverbal and non-verbal communication are recognised as being used more by youth than by adults, potentially as strategic tools to communicate their arguments with greater impact during negotiations. These findings support SDG 16, SDG 13 and SDG 4, contributing to ongoing discussions related to climate change communication, climate governance, youth participatory processes, and educational pathways, with practical implications for policy and practice in these domains.

1. Introduction

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) is the main arena where global climate governance is negotiated, monitored and periodically revised through the Conference of the Parties (COP) and related bodies. Within the Agenda 2030 framework, these negotiations are expected to contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including those on climate action, inequalities and inclusive institutions, which, moreover, are closely linked to debates on climate justice and on the fair distribution of climate-related burdens and benefits across generations [1]. Among the main actors advocating and working to bring climate justice to the attention of policymakers, youth are increasingly recognised as key actors, both on the ground and in institutional settings [2]. Insights from past youth involvement in negotiations indicate that the inclusion of young people in official delegations can bring new perspectives and is argued to strengthen internal delegation capacities and negotiation processes [3–5]. In line with tar-

get 16.7¹ of SDG16, youth participation in climate negotiations is not only a question of representation, but an indicator of whether decision-making structures meet this benchmark across age groups [6].

Within the UNFCCC architecture, young people have moved from observer status to a recognised constituency with specific roles and channels of influence. Since 2009, YOUNGO has served as the formal platform that organises youth participation in the process by coordinating interventions, preparing positions, convening the Conference of Youth (COY), and liaising with the secretariat and national delegations [3,7]. Empirical studies and policy briefs depict youth participation at climate conferences as structurally constrained: young delegates often remain confined to consultative roles, face barriers to accreditation, resources, and visas, and have limited access to informal spaces where

¹ Target 16.7 of SDG16 calls for responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision making at all levels.

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key trade-offs are discussed [8–10]. Policy and analytical work on youth in climate diplomacy further documents forms of tokenism and youth washing, in which youth are invited to speak but have limited influence on core decision-making [11,12]. Policy guidance on meaningful youth engagement reaches similar conclusions on the limits of current practice [10]. Existing literature examines youth numbers in delegations, formal roles, barriers, intergenerational justice claims, and young activists' communication during protests [13,14] and on social media [15], but pays less attention to the communicative dynamics through which young delegates attempt to intervene in negotiations, highlighting a gap.

Furthermore, in current negotiations, having a good argument is no longer sufficient for a negotiator to be effective. What is required is the implementation of effective communication techniques that create connections among parties, and which are targeted based on the understanding of how the counterparts perceive the reality, the issues treated and their communication [16]. Therefore, understanding how youth communicate in climate negotiations becomes extremely relevant for analysing the communication techniques they use and whether these align with those used by adults. This helps understand whether their current techniques are designed to foster a collaborative dialogue among the different interlocutors, build intergenerational equity, and, consequently, reach better agreements. Additionally, as communication in negotiations is based on three levels - verbal, paraverbal, and non-verbal communication - [16], it becomes relevant to study youth communication through these three lenses, as well as through the content they mainly discuss in the negotiations.

To address this gap, interviewing young negotiators and observers at COP29, we examine: Which are the negotiation styles implemented the most by youth at climate negotiations? Which are the negotiation styles implemented the most by adults at climate negotiations? Which thematic areas do youth have the most and least access to negotiate? Who among youth and adults mostly use paraverbal and non-verbal communication? Based on our literature review, we hypothesised that young negotiators mainly use storytelling to communicate, unmatching the style employed by adult negotiators, and underlining a misaligned and ineffective communication among the parties. Furthermore, in terms of thematic areas, we hypothesised that youth are mainly marginalised and tokenised in climate justice-related topics. Youth are expected to engage highly in paraverbal and non-verbal communication as part of their storytelling and urgency in demanding action, while adults are expected to act more composed and neutral. Exploring these communication and participation dynamics contributes to a better understanding of what may be required to support the implementation of specific SDGs, such as SDG 13 Climate Action, SDG 4 Quality Education, and SDG 16 Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions.²

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 provides a more precise introduction to the current literature on youth climate communication, ranging from activism to governance, the types of communication techniques used in negotiations, and the thematic access of youth in climate negotiations. Section 3 presents our research method and data analysis. The final section presents the results, the discussion and draws the main conclusions of this research.

² This study contributes in particular to: SDG 16 target 16.7 which mandates responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision making at all levels, by providing a potential benchmark through which institutional participation quality may be assessed; SDG 13 target 13.3 which calls for improved education, awareness raising and human and institutional capacity on climate change mitigation and adaptation, by suggesting a foundation for effective engagement in technical negotiation processes; and SDG 4 target 4.7 that requires that learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, by better understanding the educational outcomes that can enable navigation of complex policy environments.

2. Literature review

2.1. Youth climate communication from activism to governance

Youth climate communication has mainly been studied in relation to activism in the public sphere. Research on movements such as Fridays for Future documents the use of social media, street protests and transnational networks to mobilise supporters, construct collective identities and frame climate change as intergenerational justice [14,15,17], showing capacity to construct complex climate discourses and to mobilise across online and offline arenas. Studies of digital campaigning and activism show how young people personalise climate impacts and combine scientific information with moral and emotional appeals through visual storytelling [18–20]. Young activists employ dissensus and confrontational rhetoric to contest adult authority [21–23]. These communicative practices connect rights-based language with long-term responsibility in narratives on intergenerational justice [24,25] that emphasise care and multigenerational responsibility [26,27]. Only a small part of this research follows young actors as they move from protest and media spaces into institutional arenas such as negotiation rooms at climate conferences. Studies of youth participation in UN climate governance document how young people navigate the rules, spaces and power relations of the UNFCCC process, facing barriers as accreditation, resourcing and constraints on who can speak where [7,8,11]. These studies tend to focus on formal presence as a constituency, on broad justice-oriented claims [8,10], and on prominent youth voices, such as Greta Thunberg, and their media representation and symbolic leadership [28,29], leaving understudied how young delegates negotiate within procedural constraints. Additionally, limited research examined how young people negotiate with adult interlocutors in climate negotiation spaces. These documented barriers to meaningful youth participation bear directly on SDG 16 target 16.7, which calls for responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels [6]. This research aims to enrich the current literature by analysing youth verbal, paraverbal and non-verbal communication in climate negotiations, comparing it with that of adults.

2.2. Communication in climate negotiations

Research on international negotiation underlines that communication is not a neutral channel but a constitutive element of how parties frame issues and construct agreements in culturally diverse environments [30]. In multilateral settings, culturally grounded expectations about appropriate behaviour interact with institutional rules and power asymmetries, so that some ways of speaking are more readily recognised as legitimate than others [31]. Classic models distinguish between distributive and integrative bargaining and identify conflict management styles such as competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding and accommodating [32,33]. Other work contrasts positional and interest-based negotiation and examines how cognitive and emotional factors shape how negotiators argue and reach agreements [31]. Specific communication strategies for negotiations have been developed [16], as well as climate change communication frames applicable to multiple contexts [34]. Cross-cultural research links communication patterns to cultural value dimensions and institutional contexts [30]. Within this field, Harris and Moran [35] propose a typology of negotiation styles that links communication behaviour to patterns of information processing and value orientations, distinguishing factual, analytic, intuitive and normative styles.³ Research based on these four styles investigates their association with cultural value dimensions and demonstrates their applicability to multilateral negotiations, focusing on business contexts [36,37] and diplomatic settings [38].

³ Definitions of Harris and Moran's styles can be found in Table 1.

Negotiation styles, youth development, and climate governance represent three established literatures that have not yet intersected on this question. Developmental research offers frameworks for analysing adolescent negotiation, but these focus on peer, family, and school settings rather than international institutions [39,40]. Studies of youth participation in climate governance examine access, agency, and representation [7,8] with limited analysis of communication styles employed during negotiations.

This research aims to advance negotiation communication research by extending the Moran and Harris typology from business and diplomatic contexts to institutional climate governance, integrating paraverbal and non-verbal dimensions alongside verbal communication patterns, and applying bidirectional youth-adult comparative analysis. In doing so, the framework has the potential to examine how communicative interactions between generations, rather than structural barriers alone, appear to likely produce and sustain participation asymmetries, a level of analysis that existing participation and negotiation styles literature has not jointly addressed. This approach enables exploring whether communication alignment or misalignment across generations may affect negotiation participation, collaboration and outcomes in multilateral climate settings.

2.3. Youth thematic access in climate communication

Communication in negotiations involves not only the style used, but also the type of content a party seeks to convey [31]. The thematic content communicated is based on a person's knowledge and competencies in these matters, which in turn enables them to access specific discussions to a greater or lesser extent [41]. Research on youth and climate change shows detailed assessments of competencies and environmental sustainability skills [42,43]. Studies on adolescents in Europe and elsewhere identify profiles of climate change awareness that combine knowledge, concern and willingness to act, and show that young people with higher knowledge tend to express stronger engagement and support for mitigation policies, even if these patterns vary across social groups [44,45]. Other studies construct climate-related capability and literacy scales that capture the ability to interpret information, evaluate claims and consider multiple perspectives in climate debates [43,46].

Reports on European youth and climate change show that young people wish to participate more directly in climate decision-making, associate expertise with youth movements alongside scientists and international organisations, see climate change as central to their future careers, and call for better integration of climate topics in education and labor market policies [47,48].

Analyses of youth participation in climate diplomacy and capacity building within the UNFCCC note that young delegates express interest in a wide range of negotiation-relevant themes, from adaptation and finance to Loss and Damage, but often report feeling better prepared to speak on general narratives of justice and ambition than on technical agenda items, partly due to limited access to training and mentoring [8,12]. Reports produced within the UNFCCC process similarly indicate that young participants engage with several agenda items, yet highlight persistent capacity gaps on more technical topics [49]. YOUNGO advocacy documents show that youth demands span agenda items on mitigation, adaptation, climate finance, Loss and Damage, Article 6 and climate education [50–52], with these demands becoming more granular over time [53]. Policy documents and youth-focused climate initiatives call for involvement across all thematic areas, but formulate this as a normative request rather than as an empirical dimension that can be measured [10,54,55]. To fill this gap, enrich the current literature, and promote practical improvements in processes, actors, institutional entities, and collaboration, this study aims to investigate which thematic areas young delegates may have greater access to and opportunities to discuss in climate negotiations, contributing evidence relevant to SDG 13 target 13.3 on improving human and institutional capacity on climate

change, and SDG 4 target 4.7 on education for sustainable development [1].⁴

To fill this gap, enrich the current literature, support SDG 13 and SDG 4,⁵ and promote practical improvements in processes, actors, institutional entities, and collaboration, this study aims to investigate which thematic areas young delegates have greater access to and opportunities to discuss in climate negotiations.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

This study aims to explore how youth⁶ communicate at climate negotiation tables, which thematic areas they have greater access to and credibility in, and how adult negotiators communicate, particularly from a youth's perspective.⁷ Participants include young climate negotiators and observers (up to 35 years old) and adult negotiators and observers with direct experience working alongside youth delegates. 23 youth and three adults were interviewed⁸ (see Table A1 in the Appendix), both onsite at COP29 and online. Limited adult participants reflect low availability during COP29 and the surrounding period.⁹ This sample structure related to the research particularly valuable for gathering information related to youth's opinions on how adults perceive their negotiation. The sample is relatively sex-balanced¹⁰ (46% female, 54% male), and the participants' nationalities are predominantly from Global North countries, especially from Europe.¹¹ Nevertheless, the predominance of youth and Global

⁴ Understanding youth capacity and thematic access patterns in climate negotiations aligns with SDG 13 target 13.3 on climate change capacity building, and SDG 4 target 4.7 on education for sustainable development, yet empirical evidence on how capacity translates into actual negotiation participation across thematic areas remains limited.

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⁶ By youth, in this study, we refer to people up to 35 years old, as conceived by YOUNGO [56].

⁷ While this research employs youth and adults as analytical references for comparing perceived communication patterns, these two groups should not be conceived as internally homogeneous, as interviewees indeed differ in their experiences, backgrounds, and other contextual factors.

⁸ In addition to the 23 youth and three adults interviewed, other two youth and three adults have been interviewed too, but being unable to reply to many questions, they have been excluded from the final sample.

⁹ During COP29 and the surrounding period, many negotiators and observers were engaged in intensive working schedules - including negotiation sessions, coordination meetings, and other delegation responsibilities - within a context that is highly dynamic, demanding and time-constrained. As a consequence, this high workload usually limits their discretionary time and, therefore, their availability for voluntary research interviews. This may have contributed to the relatively lower availability of adult negotiators and observers - occupying senior positions - compared to the younger negotiators and observers for interviews during the same period, consequently shaping the composition of this research's sample.

¹⁰ In this study, sex (female/male) refers to biological attributes as self-reported by participants during recruitment.

¹¹ This distribution might reflect the authors' easier access to participants from these geographical areas, as their professional network was mainly linked to people from the Global North rather than from the Global South. Acknowledging the mentioned difficulty of securing interviews with negotiators, access through existing contacts or through people attending events facilitated the process. Indeed, the authors attended COP29 as representatives of a non-governmental organization with the aim of conducting the research, and at the same time, carrying out events and activities targeting youth. Their position, on the one hand, facilitated data collection, but it may also have influenced the composition of the sample and the dynamics of the interviews. To mitigate possible biases, the

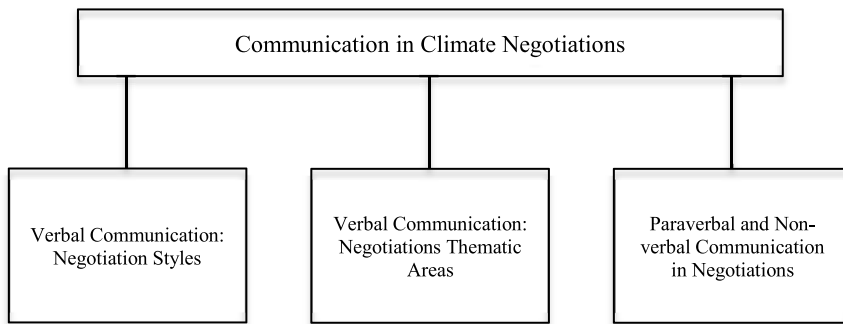


Fig. 1. Three-dimensional analytical framework developed for the analysis of communication in climate negotiations.

North interviewees may limit broader claims and the generalisability of the findings.

3.2. Semi-structured interviews

This study is built on a qualitative approach, based on semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with 26 people both onsite at COP29 and online through Google Meet during the month following the Conference. Each interview took, on average, one hour to allow the interviewees to share their perspectives without time constraints and to investigate multiple elements in greater depth, going beyond our inputs. To guide interviewees and ensure consistency among their replies, a standardised interview guide has been used. The questions included: (1) Could you describe a moment at climate negotiations in which young negotiators' communication was particularly powerful and effective?; (2) Please read these communication approaches and tell me which of these youth use the most when negotiating; (3) What about adult negotiators? Which of these communication approaches do you think they implement the most in climate negotiations?; (4) Among these negotiation topics, which ones do you think youth discuss the most, having more accessibility and credibility in negotiations? Why?; (5) Among youth and adult negotiators, who, if any of them, do you think apply paraverbal and non-verbal communication while negotiating? Why? To reduce interviewees' bias while ensuring transparent and authentic replies, they were not aware of the study's specific aim. Before being interviewed, interviewees were made aware of more detailed definitions related to communication aspects, for instance, the difference between verbal, paraverbal, and non-verbal communication, to ensure all participants had common knowledge of the treated topics. Additionally, specifics about questions only referring to youth actively involved in climate negotiations have been shared with the participants, to ensure their responses were not referring to youth communication in other initiatives at COPs.

3.3. Analytical framework

Based on the literature review, an analytical framework used both as a guide during the semi-structured interviews, as well as to analyse the data gathered in a systematic and evidence-based structure, has been created. This analytical framework is composed of three dimensions, based on the concept of communication in negotiations developed on three levels: verbal, paraverbal and non-verbal [16]. Developed in alignment with the objectives of this research, the three dimensions of the analytical framework are: 1. Verbal Communication: Negotiation Styles; 2. Verbal Communication: Negotiations Thematic Areas; 3. Paraverbal and Non-verbal Communication in Negotiations. Fig. 1 summarises the analytical framework. The three dimensions represent parallel analytical categories, not causally related variables.

interview protocol has always been followed and respected, including coverage of youth and adults to ensure diverse perspectives.

Table 1

Negotiation styles included in "Verbal communication: Negotiation styles" of the analytical framework.

Negotiation style	Explanation	Simplified explanation for interviewers
Normative (Harris & Moran, 1991)	Judging and evaluating what to communicate based on the counterparts' ideas and values to create a harmonious relationship	Enriching the counterpart ideas
Intuitive (Harris & Moran, 1991)	Offering forward-looking solutions following intuitions through active listening to uncover latent needs and emotions of the counterpart to make them follow their inspirations	Applying active listening to uncover latent needs and emotions of the counterpart
Analytical (Harris & Moran, 1991)	Using logical analysis, identifying cause and effect, putting things into logical order to propose solutions	Employing logic and problem-solving, proposing solutions rooted in rationality
Factual (Harris & Moran, 1991)	Pointing out facts and details in a neutral way, assuming that facts speak for themselves	Based on facts, showing reality in a neutral form
Storytelling (Houston and Vasudevan, 2017)	Designing and presenting targeted narratives that evoke emotional responses and increase memorability	Telling stories to raise emotions

Firstly, starting from the first dimension, Verbal Communication: Negotiation Styles, to identify how young and adult negotiators communicate, we adapted the four negotiation styles developed by Harris and Moran [35] as the first dimension of our analytical framework. Consistent with current literature recognising that youth are characterised by storytelling-based communication [57], this form of communication has been added to the framework as a fifth negotiation style. As shown in Table 1, the negotiation styles in the framework are: Normative, focused on enriching the counterpart's ideas by judging and evaluating how to tailor communication to their values to maintain harmony; Intuitive, based on active listening to uncover the counterpart's latent needs and emotions and guide them towards forward-looking solutions; Analytical, grounded in logic and problem-solving, using cause-and-effect analysis and structured reasoning to propose rational solutions; Factual, based on presenting facts and reality in a neutral way; and Storytelling, centred on telling stories to evoke emotions and enhance memorability. Negotiation styles were selected over communication strategies as they are more stable tendencies, characterising how a negotiator thinks, interprets and interacts, while communication strategies are tools implemented during the negotiation process to influence the discussion, which therefore vary more and are more short-term related, making it more difficult to draw a long-term communication negotiator profile.

In regard to the second dimension, Verbal Communication: Negotiations Thematic Areas, to effectively engage in discussions on certain topics, negotiators need access to these thematic areas. This access is

Table 2

Thematic areas included in “Verbal communication: Negotiations thematic areas” of the analytical framework.¹²

Thematic areas in climate negotiations		
Climate finance and New Collective Quantified Goal (NCQG)	Energy transition and fossil fuel phase-down	Human rights
Adaptation Mitigation	Technology Governance and transparency (Enhanced Transparency Framework, public awareness/access to information)	Health Food security (Agriculture, land and water)
Loss and Damage	Children and Youth, and Education	Ecosystems (Nature, ocean, forests, desertification) and biodiversity
Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs)	Gender	Urban and transport
Carbon Market	Indigenous peoples	Global Action Plan

enabled by a low level of resistance and barriers related to physical access to negotiation rooms with specific tracks, the level of technical knowledge and experience required to discuss certain topics, and perceived credibility on those topics, which determines whether negotiators are listened to and considered during negotiations and final decision-making processes. Therefore, in this research, we conceptualise the accessibility of negotiation thematic areas as a form of communication accessibility, referring to the topics that are most and least discussed, specifically by young negotiators. To understand which are these negotiations thematic areas, the list of topics referring to the climate negotiations present in the official COP29 application for the Conference participants has been transcribed to be used as a base for the second dimension of the analytical framework. These thematic areas are reported in Table 2. This list has been selected over negotiation tracks as it is more representative and articulated, considering topics discussed also horizontally in multiple negotiations.

Finally, for what concerns the third dimension, Paraverbal and Non-verbal Communication in Negotiations, to completely analyse communication in negotiations, in addition to the verbal level, it is necessary to include the paraverbal and non-verbal level [16]. While verbal communication transfers content and information through words, paraverbal communication regards additional elements such as the timbre, tone, rhythm of the conversation, allowing the expansion of certain concepts. Non-verbal communication is considered the highest communication skill when negotiating, as it allows the sharing of more information through body language, such as eye contact, facial expressions, and posture. These form the third dimension of the analytical framework.

3.4. Data analysis

The 26 interviews were recorded with participants' consent and transcribed through Trint¹³ to perform a thematic analysis of participant responses following a deductive and inductive approach. This enables theory-based analysis, innovation and openness to new patterns deriving

from empirical data, enhancing the findings' relevance. Firstly, to identify the negotiation styles employed by youth and adults, the transcripts were systematically coded through the first dimension of the analytical framework, Verbal Communication: Negotiation Styles. An inductive coding process was then applied to identify possible additional negotiation styles emerging from the interviews. A similar approach was applied to identify the thematic areas. Firstly, interviews were deductively coded based on the second dimension of the analytical framework, Verbal Communication: Negotiations Thematic Areas. Secondly, through inductive coding, additional thematic areas mentioned by the participants were added. While, to analyse the paraverbal and non-verbal communication, only deductive coding was implemented through the third dimension of the analytical framework, Paraverbal and Non-verbal Communication in Negotiations. Once the content was analysed and categorised, we translated qualitative data into quantitative data to enable a systematic comparison of responses across interviews regarding the use of different negotiation styles performed by youth and adults, the thematic areas to which youth have access, and the use of paraverbal and non-verbal communication by both youth and adults. Consistency, comparability, and reliability in this process have been ensured through predefined questions and the lists of elements to be selected and commented on in the semi-structured interviews, while allowing elements to emerge naturally during the interviews. The frequency with which each questioned element was selected by participants has been recorded and used as coding process, as the interview questions regarding the previously mentioned areas allowed participants to select multiple elements. These frequencies have then been converted into percentages, as they provide a more understandable overview of the relevance of each analysed element and dimension, thereby allowing clearer interpretation and comparison of the results. The percentages have been calculated by analysing the proportion of selected items by the interviewees' selections, relative to the total number of selections. The resulting percentages show the respective distribution of the elements selected by interviewees. This structured coding process has been applied consistently across all the data, and ambiguous interview replies have been reviewed and discussed to secure alignment in their interpretation.

4. Results

4.1. The perceived negotiation styles employed by youth

Drawing on the analysis of the participants (23 youth, 3 adults), regarding Verbal Communication: Negotiation Styles, the following results emerged. Storytelling seems to be the most applied negotiation style by youth in climate negotiations, with all interviewees recognising it as a powerful characteristic of young negotiators communication, but most underline that Storytelling is powerful only if supported by facts. 77%¹⁴ of participants declared that the Factual negotiation style is also perceived as highly used by youth to be credible. A youth shared: “*The most effective is when storytelling and data meet, when youth say ‘this is my experience, and this is the evidence’.*” (interviewee 13, youth, female, Italy) and another declared “*Youth tend to combine personal narratives with data in their interventions in order to make their communication both credible and relatable at the same time, which can be quite effective. In the Y20 context, for instance, we learned to frame our recommendations using facts and the policy language that aligns with G20 priorities and existing frameworks, while still maintaining a distinct youth voice and perspective.*” (interviewee 02, youth, female, Italy). These two styles together are described as very effective in past negotiations, as one participant shared “*I remember at COP28, a youth delegate intervened during a high-level roundtable on Article 2.1(c), and what struck me was how she used very strategic data points but framed them within a justice narrative and*

¹² Gender in this research, when referenced as a thematic area, refers to the UNFCCC policy domain addressing gender equality and women's rights in climate action.

¹³ Trint is an AI-powered transcription software used in this study to transcribe recorded interview audio files into text. More specifically, transcriptions were generated using Trint ASR v1.27 (web platform, November 2025 release), developed by Trint Ltd. (London, UK).

¹⁴ All percentages presented represent the frequency with which each element was selected and mentioned by participants

through storytelling. She didn't just present a complaint or demand, she provided actionable language that later reappeared in a party's intervention. That moment really showed how targeted communication can shape the tone and content of negotiation language." (interviewee 11, female, Italy). Intuitive and Analytical styles, identified by 27% of interviewers, appear to represent the third and fourth negotiation styles to be implemented by youth. "Storytelling and facts are the most common, but the shift I'm seeing is towards logic-based framing, especially among those with technical backgrounds or who've worked inside the UNFCCC ecosystem for a while." (interviewee 19, youth, male, Italy) one affirmed, while another "Storytelling is key, but it has to be grounded in expertise. I see a lot of young women in particular using this hybrid model, they don't give up on emotion, but they back it up with rigour. Some also lean into the Intuitive style, especially when presenting technical demands or countering institutional inertia." (interviewee 11, youth, female, Italy). Only 4% of participants selected the Normative style. No additional negotiation styles emerged beyond those in the first dimension of our theoretical framework.

Among all the five styles, the Analytical one has been reported as "the most respected by adults", suggesting that it may represent the most effective for youth to implement in order to be taken more seriously by adults. In their opinion, adult negotiators perceive youth as mainly emotional since they communicate passionately and through Storytelling, bypassing facts and technicalities exposed due to possible perception bias and intergenerational gap. As shared by a couple of youth "There's a huge gap between how youth see themselves and how they are seen by adults. Youth see themselves as factual and rigorous, and they often are. But adults tend to filter youth speech through an emotional lens. They remember the tears, the slogans, not the citations. That's partly generational bias and partly a defensive instinct. Adults sometimes feel exposed by youth clarity." (interviewee 01, youth, male, United States), and "They mistake passion for inexperience. It's a perceptual bias. I've seen youth delegations dismissed as activists, even when they're quoting legal texts." (interviewee 12, youth, male, Czech Republic), while another one said "They hear emotions and assume lack of depth. But often we've read more documentation than they have. I've seen youth delegates quote annexes from memory. The problem is adults expect youth to be symbolic. So when we speak with authority, it throws them off. I've seen it happen. Last year, I made a statement referencing paragraph 49 of the SBSTA text and was told I was 'too rehearsed', as if competence was suspicious." (interviewee 03, youth, female, Italy).

Participants also declared that to be effective, youth should be able to properly change the negotiation styles based on the thematic areas discussed and the phase of the negotiation. They also reported that, usually, the effective use of Storytelling is mainly associated with climate justice-related topics, while Factual and Analytical are more technical-related thematic areas. Currently, 62% of interviewees perceive youth as able to switch negotiation styles when needed, while 27% believe they can do so only if they receive training through communication programs.

4.2. The perceived negotiation styles employed by adults

By applying the deductive analysis through the first dimension of the analytical framework, different levels of negotiation styles perceived as being employed by adults were observed - with the interpretation of adult negotiation being primarily shaped by youth participants, who represented the majority of the sample. Similar with youth, 73% of interviewees selected the Factual style as mostly used by adults. Secondly, according to 69% of participants, adults appear to frequently use the Analytical negotiation style, followed by the Normative style (42%) and the Intuitive one (12%). A participant replied with "Adults use Factual and Analytical, definitely, and consensus-driven. Sometimes overly cautious, in my opinion. It's a way to reduce friction, but it also limits innovation in the discourse." (interviewee 11, youth, female, Italy). According to 8% of participants, adults tend to use the Storytelling negotiation style, making it perceived as much less frequently used than by youth. A youth shared "Adults lean on the Factual and Analytical styles, with procedural, legal framing and coalition argumentation. It's drier but safer. Rarely do you

Table 3

Analysis results of the most and least accessible thematic areas for youth in negotiations, expressed as percentages representing the frequency with which each thematic area was mentioned by participants.

Thematic areas in climate negotiations	Most accessible to youth	Least accessible to youth
Climate finance and New Collective Quantified Goal (NCQG)	23%	54%
Adaptation	8%	8%
Mitigation	4%	4%
Loss and Damage	39%	0%
Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs)	0%	8%
Carbon Market (Article 6)	4%	65%
Energy transition and fossil fuel phase-down	8%	12%
Technology	15%	27%
Governance and transparency (Enhanced Transparency Framework, public awareness/access to information)	35%	12%
Children and Youth, and Education	89%	0%
Gender	54%	0%
Indigenous peoples	35%	0%
Human rights	42%	0%
Health	12%	0%
Food security (Agriculture, land and water)	8%	8%
Ecosystems (Nature, ocean, forests, desertification) and biodiversity	19%	0%
Urban and transport	8%	4%
Global Action Plan (Global Stocktake)	4%	8%
Action for Climate Empowerment (ACE)	12%	0%
Trade mechanisms	0%	15%
Capacity building framework	19%	0%
Digital governance	4%	0%
Military implications	0%	4%

see adults go full emotional, unless it's closing plenary time." (interviewee 09, youth, male, Germany), while another one said "Adults primarily use formal diplomatic language and coalition building strategies. That conveys authority and signals serious engagement with the process, but it can lack emotional resonance sometimes. It can feel quite distant from the actual impacts being discussed." (interviewee 06, youth, female, Italy). Different from when referring to youth negotiators, additional negotiation styles were identified and coded regarding adult negotiators' communication, including the selective sharing of information to manipulate counterparts, and the strategic use of silence, mainly described by the participants as ineffective. As reported in an interview "The least effective style is probably silence or bluntness, as it can be misinterpreted in diplomatic settings unless you're already in a strong position." (interviewee 13, youth, female, Italy). Having few opportunities to talk, youth would avoid using these styles, preferring to take advantage of the moment in order to share strong and complete arguments.

4.3. Youth perceived accessibility to negotiations thematic areas

Regarding Verbal Communication: Negotiations Thematic Areas, we identified the thematic areas to which youth appear to have more and less access to when discussing in climate negotiations. As shown in Table 3, the thematic area of Children and Youth, and Education has been mentioned most frequently in the interviews (by 89% of participants) while referring to the thematic areas with more access for youth when negotiating, followed by Gender (54%), Human rights (42%), Loss and Damage (39%) and Governance and transparency (35%). A youth shared "I'd say Loss and Damage, Education, and increasingly Transparency

are the areas that youth discuss the most. Youth have indeed developed impressive capacity in these areas, especially through YOUNGO's working groups. In Transparency, for instance, I've seen youth draft shadow reports and provide feedback on the Enhanced Transparency Framework, which is quite technical." (interviewee 01, youth, male, United States). Differently, among the least accessible thematic areas, interviewees identified the Carbon Market, very often referred to by participants as Article 6, as the area in which youth seem to face the greatest difficulties in negotiating (65%). A youth replied "Article 6 is definitely the least accessible topic for youth. Market mechanisms are still a highly protected space. It's gatekept by technical jargon and a closed culture. With also Agriculture, they tend to be dominated by state and corporate interests, so youth voices are often peripheral there." (interviewee 01, youth, male, United States). Climate Finance and NCQG have been identified by 54% of interviewees as appearing to be the second least accessible to youth, followed by Technology (27%) and Trade mechanisms (15%).

Participants stated "In spaces like Climate Finance or the Carbon Market? Much harder to find youth negotiating. There's technical complexity, yes, but also a certain gatekeeping. At COP29 there were moments where youth were essentially sidelined in finance-related discussions, and it sends a signal, unintentionally or not, that some voices matter more." (interviewee 02, youth, female, Italy) as well as "Where do we get completely shut out? Finance mechanisms, anything related to actual money flows, trade discussions, and the technical details of offsets and baselines. Not because we lack understanding of these things. Because those spaces are protected by people who benefit from keeping the current systems exactly as they are. (...) I have been in rooms where adults nod politely while you speak and then just do whatever they already planned to do. They let you have your moment, let you feel included, then move on without changing anything. That is almost worse than being excluded because it is this performance of participation without actual power." (interviewee 07, youth, male, Italy). These difficulties in being able to actively participate, communicate and be seriously considered regarding these thematic areas in negotiations, have been suggested by the interviewees to be linked to potential forms of intergenerational inequity and possible structural inaccessibility. They reported "This is not justified. I think the exclusion is structural, not merit based. I've met youth who are more knowledgeable than some state delegates. The problem is access. Youth are asked to prove themselves twice as much, while adults are assumed competent. It's a bias that reproduces itself across all tracks." (interviewee 01, youth, male, United States) and "I think this reflects a lack of structural access, not a lack of capacity. In fact, many youth have backgrounds in law, finance, data science. It's more about whether institutions value that input or not. Youth aren't just passionate advocates. They're often the ones building the future frameworks in practice." (interviewee 11, youth, female, Italy). In general, 27% of interviewees while talking genuinely underlined that youth have more access to negotiating about climate justice related topics, while 62% reported higher difficulties for youth access to all those topics that are considered as more technical. Furthermore, certain themes were not particularly mentioned in either positive or negative terms regarding accessibility, suggesting that they may remain more neutral. Examples are Adaptation, Mitigation, NDCs, Food security, Urban and transport, and Global Action Plan, mainly referred to as Global Stocktake by the participants. Additionally, some interviews indicated new thematic areas beyond those included in the analytical framework, such as ACE (12%), Capacity building framework (19%) and Digital governance (4%), which interviewees described as often discussed by youth, whereas Trade mechanisms (15%) and Military implications (4%) appear to be less frequently discussed by youth in negotiations.

4.4. The perceived use of paraverbal and non-verbal communication by youth and adults

Regarding Paraverbal and Non-verbal Communication, interviews generally indicated that many participants reported young negotiators

using more both paraverbal and non-verbal communication. Specifically, 84% declared that they perceived these two levels of communication as more commonly employed by youth, 8% more by adults, and 8% by both of them equally. The reason behind the difference in usage may relate to the youth's need to capture the counterpart's attention, to be listened to, to make an impact, and to be effective in delivering the message. This appears to be due to the worry of not being sufficiently listened and taken into account, therefore suggesting that youth try to leverage these communication levels strategically. As shared by some participants "Youth. No question. From body posture to voice modulation, there's more variation and emotional register. Adults often stick to a neutral tone. Youth can't afford to be monotone, they're trying to be memorable." (interviewee 19, youth, male, Italy) and "We don't always have voting power or formal roles. So presence becomes performance. A confident voice, a visible gesture, it's part of building credibility." (interviewee 15, youth, female, United Kingdom). Differently, adults are described as having much more composed and neutral communication, usually more typical of general diplomatic settings. The interviewees perceive this as a less impactful element. A youth explained "Youth use vocal variety, expressive gestures, eye contact, we create presence. Adults are more neutral in tone and posture, which might come from habit or the constraints of protocol. But honestly, expressiveness cuts through the noise in plenaries and press spaces." (interviewee 11, youth, female, Italy).

5. Discussion and conclusion

5.1. Discussion

This study investigates communication at verbal, paraverbal and non-verbal levels in climate negotiations to explore how communication may differ between young and adults. An analytical framework based on three dimensions (Verbal Communication: Negotiation Styles; Verbal Communication: Negotiations Thematic Areas; Paraverbal and Non-verbal Communication) was developed, including negotiation styles built on the four of Harris and Moran [35] - Normative, Intuitive, Analytical, Factual - in addition to Storytelling [57], and thematic areas accessibility. This was applied to code 26 interviews conducted at and following COP29 (23 youth participants, 3 adults), through deductive and inductive analysis, from which results were interpreted as indicative tendencies and patterns, rather than uniform behaviors across all youth and adult negotiators.

Keeping into account the results are based on the analysis of mainly youth's perspective, results on Verbal Communication: Negotiation Styles suggest both youth and adult negotiators may primarily rely on the Factual style (77% and 73% respectively¹²), yet complementary styles seem to differ substantially across generations. Adults appear to use Normative styles more frequently (42% compared with 4% for youth), presenting as brokers who build on counterparts' ideas, propose textual bridges, and rephrase positions toward common language. Adults also appear to employ the Analytical style substantially more than youth (69% compared with 27%). Interviewees identified Analytical style as "the most respected by adults", appearing as the style youth perceive most effective for establishing credibility in negotiations. This may create a dual exclusion: while Normative styles build collaboration through co-authoring compromise language, Analytical style confers legitimacy in adult-dominated spaces. Youth reported limited use of both Normative (4%) and Analytical (27%), which might exclude them from the two currencies of negotiation authority: the collaboration-building mechanisms valued in principle, and the logic-based credibility markers that adult negotiators appear likely to recognise as authoritative in practice. Interviewees identified additional strategies implemented by adults, including selective information sharing and strategic silence, perceived as ineffective and not accessible to youth who, described as facing limited speaking opportunities, should aim to maximise each intervention with complete arguments.

Youth seem to compensate through Storytelling combined with Factual style, creating a hybrid communication described by all interviewees as powerful when grounded in data [57]. Yet adults are perceived as filtering youth interventions through an emotional lens, appearing to remember passion over citations despite equivalent technical rigour. Interviewees reported youth quoting specific paragraphs and treaty annexes from memory, only to be dismissed as "*too rehearsed*" or perceived as activists rather than negotiators. These dynamics likely produce what literature terms asymmetric recognition [8,11,12]: youth seem to be formally acknowledged as stakeholders, yet their capacity to shape core choices is observed to remain relatively limited, potentially influenced by factors that may relate to structural constraints.

Intuitive listening appears to remain limited in both groups (12% for adults, 27% for youth), though youth are described as employing it more frequently than adults. This pattern might confirm that negotiation exchanges remain oriented toward positional statements rather than genuine exploration of underlying needs and constraints [31,32].

Regarding Verbal Communication: Negotiations Thematic Areas, interviewees reported perceiving youth having access to Children and Youth, and Education (89%), Gender (54%), Human rights (42%), Loss and Damage (39%), Indigenous peoples (35%), and Ecosystems and biodiversity (19%). By contrast, 65% of respondents reported perceiving youth excluded from the Carbon Market theme, 54% from Climate finance and NCQG, 27% from Technology, and 15% from Trade mechanisms. This thematic segmentation is reported not to reflect deficits in youth competences. They described many young delegates possessing backgrounds in law, economics, engineering, or data analysis, and interviewees also noted youth submissions on finance and governance as detailed and precise as those of experienced negotiators. Despite stronger institutional evidence being required, these results may suggest that the negotiation system itself might channel youth toward topics perceived as naturally more associated with young people, as Children and Youth, and Education, Gender, and Human Rights, while potentially maintaining barriers around sensitive financial and geopolitical negotiations through, for instance, dense jargon, complex legal architectures, and closed-door deliberations. Paradoxically, dedicated youth spaces like COY may risk institutionalising this separation. While valuable as entry points and learning arenas, these mechanisms may risk functioning as containment structures when unconnected to core negotiation streams [8,11,12], possibly confining youth voice to parallel tracks and reinforcing boundaries between symbolic participation and substantive influence on distributive choices.

These communication asymmetries seem to likely constrain the responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making envisaged under SDG 16 target 16.7. Youth's limited use of the Normative style described by participants may exclude young negotiators from the collaboration-building mechanisms valued in multilateral negotiations, while the perceived adults' filtering of Storytelling through an emotional lens may deny youth the credibility required to influence substantive outcomes.

Regarding paraverbal and non-verbal communication, youth seem to make more intensive use of para-verbal and non-verbal communication than adults (84% of respondents), suggesting strategic deployment of visible emotion through pauses, voice modulation, and sustained eye contact, to potentially compensate for limited decision-making power and short speaking windows. Adults appear to maintain restrained delivery, usually more aligned with diplomatic protocol, possibly reinforcing credibility within institutional culture but diluting the perceived urgency of climate impacts. Interviewees also noted regional variation, reporting Global South adult negotiators as more inclined toward expressive delivery than Global North counterparts, suggesting cultural dimensions may mediate the adult restraint norm.

These findings are highly valuable from multiple perspectives. Beyond contributing to literature gaps in climate change communication, climate governance, youth studies, and other horizontal research topics, this study contributes with direct implications in ongoing discus-

sions on how participatory processes, communication, capacity building, and educational pathways can support more inclusive and effective youth participation in climate change decision-making processes, in line with the SDG 16, SDG 13, and SDG 4 objectives. These findings advance climate change communication, climate governance, and participatory processes by showing that the perceived youth marginalisation in climate negotiations may not just rely on more formally recognised barriers, but it may also operate through communicative practices by underapplying certain negotiation styles while privileging others. This could be fundamental for building stronger collaborations and, therefore, having more positive outcomes from climate negotiations. Building on these research findings, future studies could provide stronger and more generalisable evidence to enable targeted interventions. Among these, training programs could begin addressing possible styles gaps; institutions may start shifting towards the recognition of a more expressive and emotional communication as potentially strategic; difficulties of access to specific policies and decision-making processes topics may be addressed by measuring patterns of thematic exclusion rather than solely based it on youth perceived readiness; finally, communication may start being considered more as a real climate governance strategic asset rather than an external of support. Furthermore, for practitioners, the analytical framework built in this research may provide diagnostic tools to potentially identify where communication breakdowns occur and which adaptations would improve both negotiation effectiveness and the intergenerational equity necessary for effective climate action. Analytically, the framework's specific contribution may lie in rendering observable the communicative mechanisms through which participation asymmetries appear to operate inside negotiations, mechanisms that neither participation research, centred on structural access, nor negotiation style research, centred on adult professional contexts, had previously made jointly measurable. The framework has the potential to offer a transferable analytical approach for examining participation quality across multilateral climate settings.

5.2. Limitations and future research

This study brings innovation, but it also has limitations. Methodologically, although qualitative analysis is appropriate for exploring a field not yet studied through these lenses, the number of interviews is restricted to 26, with a vast majority of youth respondents (23) compared to adults (3), which may lead to results that are possibly biased, despite measures taken to minimise this as much as possible. Running research investigating deeper the adults' perspective by focusing on interviewing them is suggested. Quantitative methodology can be applied in future research to generalise the results. Therefore, future studies could enlarge and enhance the representation of the sample both in terms of age, and nationalities, better representing the Global South and Global North. Nevertheless, it is relevant to consider the difficulty of reaching the target of this research. Furthermore, the analytical framework does not include the cultural aspect, which is relevant in multilateral negotiations and should be included in future works. Finally, communication strategies and climate change communication frames might also be applied to make the analysis more detailed.

5.3. Conclusions

This study proposes a three-dimension analytical framework encompassing verbal, paraverbal and non-verbal communication, while including negotiation styles and thematic areas accessibility. The aim is to explore youth and adults communication in climate negotiations through the analytical framework. In terms of verbal communication, findings reveal potential mismatched negotiation styles employed, with youth appearing mainly relying on Storytelling and Factual style, while adults on Factual, Analytical and Normative. The Analytical style is recognised by participants as the one around which adults usually build the perception of the counterpart's credibility. Therefore, a possible

more frequent youth implementation of it may potentially build a bridge among them and adults. In addition, the Normative style by definition aims at building relationships among counterparts, and therefore leading to collaboration, suggesting that it may be one of the main styles that both parties should adopt more. Regarding the thematic areas accessibility, in general, youth appear to have more access to discussions related to climate justice, such as Children and Youth, and Education, Gender, and Human Rights, rather than technical thematic areas, which appear more difficult for youth to be discussed in negotiations, especially Carbon Market, Climate finance and NCQG, and Technology. This suggests a possible marginalisation perceived by interviewees not as a mere result of youth's lack of technical knowledge. Indeed, while stronger institutional evidence is required to potentially confirm so, participants reported that a likely explanation of this may be a consequence of COPs' possible structural inaccessibility and intergenerational inequity. In response to this marginalisation, youth usually seem to tend to use Storytelling to be more powerful in their arguments, but as a result, it appears that adults may mainly perceive youth just as emotionally-driven, bypassing the technical information that supports the style. Furthermore, results suggest that youth, with the aim of being more memorable, may strategically apply paraverbal and non-verbal communication, much more than adults.

To conclude, these research findings refine empirical accounts of youth participation in climate governance while extending negotiation frameworks in multilateral settings. The study contributes to supporting the realisation of SDG 16 target 16.7 by showing that current negotiation communication practices may fall short of the responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making this target mandates. Potential mismatches in negotiation styles, perceived thematic marginalisation, and asymmetric recognition of communicative competence may constrain meaningful youth participation. By exploring these specific mechanisms, the study also advances SDG 13 target 13.3 on building knowledge and capacity to meet climate change, supporting more effective youth engagement through communication practices that recognise diverse negotiation styles as potentially legitimate and strategic. The study further supports SDG 4 target 4.7 too, by suggesting where capacity building may be needed to enhance education for sustainable development in these settings: targeted development in possible under-utilised negotiation styles such as Normative, access to technical thematic areas where youth are perceived to be facing exclusion, as in Carbon Market and Climate Finance, and finally communication skills that may enable navigation of negotiation expectations across formal and informal spaces.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Barbara Monticelli: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Stefano Cisternino:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Daniela Corsaro:** Supervision, Conceptualization.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the manuscript preparation process

During the preparation of this work the authors used Trint (AI-powered transcription software) in order to transcribe recorded interview audio files into text. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the transcripts as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Demographic characteristics of participants, including the categorisation by youth and adult, with youth referring to people up to 35 years old, as conceived by YOUNGO [56].

Interviewee code	Age	Youth/Adult	Gender	Country of origin
01	31	Youth	Male	United States
02	28	Youth	Female	Italy
03	34	Youth	Female	Italy
04	25	Youth	Male	Mexico
05	29	Youth	Male	Italy
06	28	Youth	Female	India
07	27	Youth	Male	Italy
08	38	Adult	Male	Italy
09	26	Youth	Male	Germany
10	28	Youth	Male	Belgium
11	29	Youth	Female	Italy
12	33	Youth	Male	Czech Republic
13	34	Youth	Female	Italy
14	43	Adult	Male	North Macedonia
15	25	Youth	Female	United Kingdom
16	27	Youth	Male	Netherlands
17	34	Youth	Male	Italy
18	28	Youth	Female	Poland
19	30	Youth	Male	Italy
20	29	Youth	Female	Italy
21	34	Youth	Female	Finland
22	31	Youth	Female	Italy
23	40	Adult	Male	Italy
24	25	Youth	Male	Ukraine
25	30	Youth	Female	Italy
26	27	Youth	Female	Germany

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