

The Forbes logo is centered at the top of the page. It consists of the word "Forbes" in a white, serif font, set against a solid black rectangular background.

May 16, 2022

Analyst Gender and Aggressive Questioning During Earnings Conference Calls

Joseph Brazel

Contributor

Male analysts' questions to CEOs are more verbally aggressive than female analysts' questions. This difference is even more pronounced when the CEO is female, according to a study forthcoming in [The Accounting Review](#).

In an article titled "The Role of Gender in the Aggressive Questioning of CEOs during Earnings Conference Calls", researchers analyzed the relationship between gender and measures of aggressive questioning. The study measured analysts' verbal aggressiveness across a spectrum of measures, including how direct the questions were, whether questions were followed up, whether questions were negative (i.e., began with phrases like "Isn't it"), and whether or not questions began with a phrase requesting permission such as "May I ask." The article is authored by Joseph Comprix from Syracuse University, Kerstin Lopatta from the University of Hamburg, and Sebastian A. Tideman from the University of Exeter.

"In reading earnings conference call transcripts, we realized that analysts often ask quite challenging questions. Prior research on verbal aggressiveness in non-professional settings finds that men are more verbally aggressive than women. However, women who self-select into high-pressure, high-stakes careers, such as analysts, may be more verbally aggressive than other women. In such a setting, it was unclear whether male analysts might be more likely to pose aggressive questions to CEOs – especially to female CEOs. We identified verbal aggressiveness using measures that have been used in journalism research to identify how

challenging journalists' questions are during presidential press conferences in the U.S.," says Comprix.

The study specifically analyzed the verbal aggressiveness of sell-side analysts' questions to CEOs during the Q&A phase of earnings conference calls. The researchers analyzed 144,501 unique analyst questions from 39,209 conference calls occurring between 2005 and 2018. They applied textual analysis to identify whether a question was verbally aggressive across the multiple dimensions. The study also employed a gender estimation tool to determine both the gender of the analyst asking the question and the CEO responding to the question.

Overall, the article reports that analysts tend to use verbally aggressive questions quite often. For example, analysts asked a follow-up question, which violates the one-turn norm in conversations, 70% of the time.

"We found that male analysts were more verbally aggressive than female analysts. Male analysts used more direct language, used more negative questions, asked more follow-up questions, and prefaced their questions more often than female analysts. Interestingly, we observed that these differences were even more pronounced when male analysts asked questions to female CEOs. We attributed this result to an in-group bias based on gender," notes Tideman.

The study then examined if analysts who employed more aggressive questioning tactics experienced better career trajectories. The article reports that female analysts were more likely to be named as one of the top 3 sell-side analysts in their industry if they were verbally aggressive. On the other hand, for male analysts, the study did not find a relationship between verbal aggressiveness and becoming a top-ranked analyst.

Comprix concludes, "We need more research to better understand the implications of verbal aggressiveness for the companies and executives involved in these calls. Do the capital markets view verbally aggressive questions as a negative signal of a firm's prospects? Do conference calls become more informative to investors when verbally aggressive questions reveal novel insights that a company did not intend to disclose? In short, we hope our research findings spur additional research on this important topic."