

# Academic Research Monitor

## Quality, Low-Risk and Momentum Investing

### Equities

Global  
Quantitative

#### Latest academic advances on factor investing

What is driving the high returns of high momentum, high quality and low beta stocks? Is it rational risk, irrational behaviour or mispricing? We track the latest academic advances on factor investing and provide insight on these questions.

#### Momentum as compensation for downside risk

Winner stocks tend to exhibit higher downside betas and lower upside betas than loser stocks, the first paper that we review suggests. This constitutes evidence that momentum returns represent compensation for bearing downside risk and appears to be in line with recent analyses on the nature of momentum crashes.

#### Has momentum stopped working? We think not.

The second paper that we review conducts a sub-sample analysis on momentum profitability in the US between 1965 and 2012 and finds that it has been significantly reduced in the most recent period 1999-2012, even if one excludes the March 2009 crash. The result has been rather intriguing and we therefore provide back-test results across several global regions (North America, UK, Europe ex. UK, Japan, Asia ex. Japan). In sharp contrast to the findings of the paper, we do not find evidence of momentum's relative underperformance in the most recent sub-period across any of the regions that we tested. We attribute the disagreement in the results in the construction of the momentum signal; we use the common (12, 1, 1) methodology: 12-month momentum signal, 1-month gap, 1-month holding, as opposed to the (6, 0, 6) used in the paper.

#### High quality is behavioural; Low-risk is due to model misspecification for betas

The last two papers that we review explore the profitability of high-quality and low-risk investing. Regarding quality, the first paper claims that research analysts typically make significantly larger forecast mistakes and are more optimistic about low quality firms. As for low-risk, the second paper argues that it is non-linearities in stock returns that are not accounted for by CAPM; in other words, the risk of low-beta stocks is not correctly estimated using just the linear CAPM beta.

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## Introduction

In this issue of our Academic Research Monitor we return to the topic of factor investing which we have discussed in several earlier editions of the ARM:

[Latest academic advances on...](#)

- [Momentum Investing](#) (January 2015)
- [Quality and Size Investing](#) (May 2015)
- [Value Investing](#) (December 2015)
- [Low-Risk Investing](#) (January 2016)
- [Factor Combination](#) (September 2016)

For this issue we focus on a number of papers around momentum, and quality (and low risk) investing (see Figure 1).

The first paper shows that momentum can be explained by breaking the market beta into upside and downside betas – momentum stocks have a higher downside and lower upside beta. The second momentum paper argues that momentum has in fact stopped "working" in the most recent period (1999-2012). Intrigued by the findings, we provide back-tests across global regions and find contradicting results, which we attribute to methodological differences.

The other two papers introduce new explanations for the quality and low risk (betting against beta) anomalies. Behavioural effects and beta mis-estimation are put forward as potential explanations of these patterns.

- **Momentum**

- **Quality / Low-risk**

### Figure 1: Papers on factor investing

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"Upside and Downside Risks in Momentum Returns"  
*Victoria Dobrynskaya*

[SSRN working paper, November 2015](#)

"Has Momentum Lost Its Momentum?"  
*Debarati Bhattacharya, Wei-Hsien Li and Gokhan Sonaer*

*Review of Quantitative Finance & Accounting, 2015*

"The Excess Returns of 'Quality' Stocks: A Behavioral Anomaly"  
*Jean-Philippe Bouchaud, Ciliberti Stefano, Augustin Landier, Guillaume Simon and David Thesmar*

[SSRN working paper, February 2016](#)

"The Betting Against Beta Anomaly: Fact or Fiction?"  
*Axel Buchner and Niklas Wagner*

[SSRN working paper, December 2015](#)

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Source: UBS.

## "Upside and Downside Risks in Momentum Returns"

by Victoria Dobrynskaya

Building on the work by Jegadeesh and Titman (1993), Victoria Dobrynskaya shows that the returns to price momentum strategies cannot be well explained by the traditional CAPM model - past winner portfolios typically have a lower beta than past loser portfolios, but also higher returns, which contradicts CAPM.

In order to correct for this, the author looks at the downside and upside betas separately. The author examines two regressions, the traditional CAPM model and an upside/downside model:

$$(1) \text{ Traditional CAPM: } r_{i,t} = \alpha_i + \beta_i \cdot r_{mkt,t} + \varepsilon_{i,t}$$

$$(2) \quad r_{i,t} = \alpha_i + \beta_i^- \cdot r_{mkt,t} + \gamma_i \cdot r_{mkt,t} \cdot I_{\{r_{mkt,t} > 0\}} + \varepsilon_{i,t}$$

Combining the betas from these two regressions allows us to define the relative upside and downside betas:

$$\text{Upside Beta, } \beta_i^+ = \beta_i^- + \gamma_i$$

$$\text{Relative Downside Beta, } \beta_i^- - \beta_i$$

$$\text{Relative Upside Beta, } \beta_i^+ - \beta_i$$

Dividing the betas into upside and downside betas seems intuitive. Investors are not typically very concerned about upside risk (unexpected gains are usually welcome, even though they may increase tracking errors) but dislike downside risk and require compensation for holding stocks with exposure to downside risk. The relative downside beta, rather than the more typically seen downside beta, measures the additional market risk on the downside after taking the overall market risk into account. This definition makes it easier to see what is driving the returns.

For her empirical analysis, the author defines price momentum as the return from 12 months ago to 1 month ago, and looks at the return over the following month. The paper discusses a very wide range of universes / strategies based on this price momentum signal, including:

- i) US price momentum decile portfolios from 1927-2013, from the Kenneth French's data library;
- ii) Price momentum quintile portfolios built in five regions (global, Europe, Asia Pacific, Japan and North America) from 1990-2013;
- iii) Double sort global portfolios based on size and price momentum (e.g. small-cap loser stocks) from the Kenneth French's data library;
- iv) Portfolios of country indices based upon the momentum of their country returns;
- v) Currency momentum portfolios, based on a universe of 45 currencies, 1984-2013.

The conclusions in each case are very similar, so we will not give the full breakdown of results here.

CAPM cannot explain the price momentum anomaly

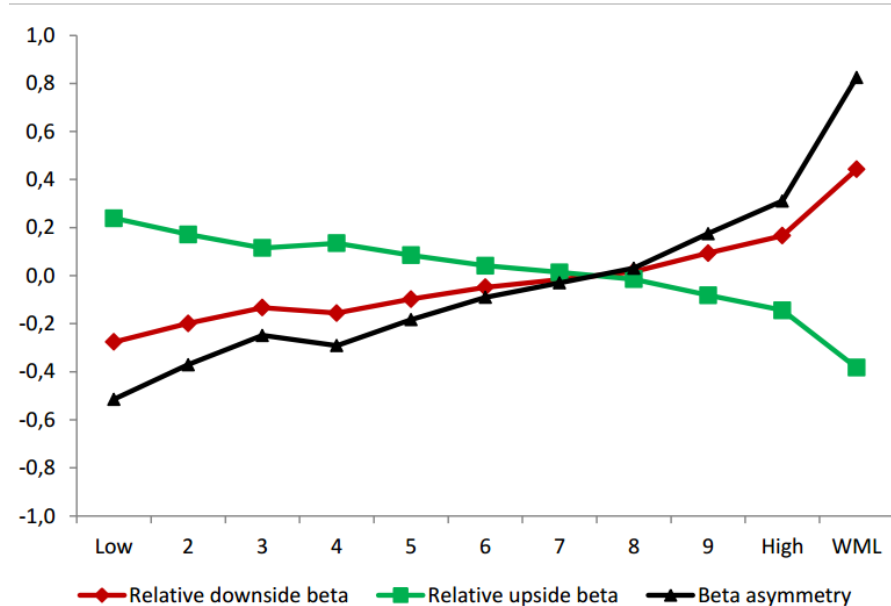
Consider upside and downside risk separately

A broad universe of momentum portfolios are studied

There are several key results. Firstly, there is a strong pattern in the relative downside betas and relative upside betas, with past winner portfolios having higher downside risk and lower upside risk than loser portfolios; see Figure 2 for the ten decile momentum portfolios in the US. This result is statistically significant. What is more, in several of the universes that the author considers, this pattern is monotonic across the decile portfolios.

Past winners have higher relative downside risk than past losers

**Figure 2: Relative upside and downside risks of US momentum portfolios**



Source: "Upside and Downside Risks in Momentum Returns" by V. Dobrynskaya; Figure 1, reproduced with permission. The figure shows the OLS estimates of relative downside and upside betas and beta asymmetry ( $\beta^- - \beta^+$ ) of 10 US value-weighted momentum portfolios, and the winner-minus-loser (WML) portfolio. Sample period: January 1927 - July 2013.

Secondly, while the CAPM relationship does not explain the cross-sectional returns of the momentum portfolios very well, a regression which includes the relative downside risk can explain the returns pretty effectively:

Relative downside risk is a priced factor in the cross-section of momentum portfolio returns

$$r_i - r_f = \beta_i \lambda + (\beta_i^- - \beta_i) \lambda^- + \mu + \varepsilon_i,$$

where,  $\lambda$  is the traditional beta premium and  $\lambda^-$  is the additional downside beta premium. This additional downside beta premium is found to be statistically significant across a number of different estimation methodologies used by the author.

This finding constitutes evidence that investors who buy price momentum are more exposed to downside risk, and less to upside risk. Along these lines, the positive momentum return can be explained as compensation for bearing downside risk.

Momentum constitutes compensation for bearing downside risk

To conclude, the evidence in this paper and the proposed explanation for momentum profits appears to be in line with recent analyses of momentum crashes; see Barroso and Santa-Clara (2015), Daniel and Moskowitz (2016) – these two papers were reviewed in our July 2013 ARM, available [here](#) – and Chabot, Ghysels and Jagannathan (2014) – this has been reviewed in our January 2015 ARM, available [here](#).

Last word – Momentum crashes

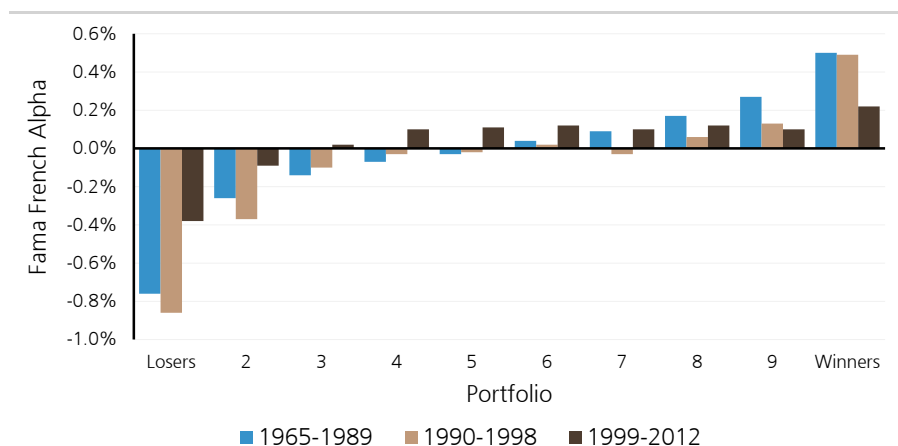
## "Has Momentum Lost its Momentum?"

by Debarati Bhattacharya, Wei-Hsien Li and Gokhan Sonaer

Debarati Bhattacharya, Wei-Hsien Li and Gokhan Sonaer claim that price momentum is no longer generating significant alpha. In order to test this claim, they compare the performance of price momentum over three sub-periods: 1965-1989, 1990-1998 and 1999-2012. They consider a variety of different price momentum strategies, but focus on the (6,0,6) strategy i.e. they rank stocks based on their return over the previous 6 months, create equal weighted decile portfolios and rebalance every six months. Unlike other commonly used methodologies, the authors did not include a lag in their definition of price momentum.<sup>1</sup>

In the first two sub-periods, they find that the winner portfolios exhibit significant and positive Fama and French (1993) alphas and the loser portfolios exhibit significant and negative alphas. In contrast, over the period from 1999-2012, the alphas of the winner and loser portfolios are not significantly different from zero (see Figure 3). This strongly suggests that the momentum strategy has stopped being profitable. Re-running this analysis, but excluding the period from 2007-2009, which includes the disastrous March '09 momentum crash, does not change this result.

**Figure 3: Fama French Alphas for momentum in three sub-periods**



Fama-French alphas for price momentum are not significant in the most recent sub-period

Source: UBS Quantitative Research. The chart is created using data from Table 2 in "Has Momentum Lost Its Momentum?" by D. Bhattacharya, W.-H. Li and G. Sonaer,

Previous work by Daniel and Moskowitz (2016) and by Cooper, Gutierrez and Hameed (2004) suggest that momentum performs better during periods of low market volatility and in rising markets, so the authors of the current paper test if the recent poor performance of momentum is due to the higher volatility and market drawdowns seen in their third sub-period from 1999 to 2012.

They divide the months from 1986 to 2012 into high and low volatility depending on whether they are above or below the overall median volatility over the whole period (we must note that this introduces a forward-looking bias in the analysis). Momentum is profitable in the period from 1986 to 1998 regardless of whether the volatility is low or high, but does not generate significant profits for the period from 1999 to 2012, even during months when volatility is classified as low.

It's not because market volatility is higher now

<sup>1</sup> In some regions this may bias down the recent performance of price momentum. We provide some empirical insight on this in the following pages.

The authors also try dividing the months into "up-market" or "down-market" months based on the performance of the market over the previous three years. In the 1965-1989 sub-period the long-short momentum portfolios (buy winners, sell losers) seem to gain significant returns in up markets but not down markets. During 1990-1998 there are no down market months to test. In contrast, in the period from 1999-2012, momentum does not perform any differently in up or down markets - returns are not significant in either case.

**It's not because we have seen more down-market periods recently**

It appears that the poor performance of the momentum strategy is not due to volatility or poor market performance. For that reason, the authors put forward three potential explanations for the decline in the performance of momentum strategies:

**Why has momentum stopped working?**

**i) The momentum anomaly is now well known and hence is arbitrated away.**

Price momentum has been widely documented and many investors now follow these strategies. If the strategy is being arbitrated away, we should expect to see investors buying winners and selling losers earlier and earlier, which will exaggerate the returns to momentum stocks during the identification period, and hence lower returns to the strategy in the holding period.

The authors do find some evidence to support this idea. It seems that, in the most recent sub-period, winner stocks have been performing better during the identification period (suggesting investors are buying up winners earlier and driving prices up) and have not had significant positive returns during the holding period (suggesting the anomaly has been arbitrated away).

**ii) Industrial production (IP) growth is no longer a priced risk premium, and the performance of momentum has been highly related to IP growth**

Liu and Zhang's (2008) paper shows that macro factors, including industrial production (IP, henceforth) growth, explain roughly one half of momentum profits, however, in the most recent sub-period the IP growth has ceased to be priced.

Regressing monthly returns to winner-loser portfolios on the three Fama-French factors and the growth rate of IP, the authors find that, while in the two earlier sub-periods the exposure to IP growth was significant and positive, it is not significantly different from zero in the period from 1999 to 2012.

**iii) Markets have become more efficient**

To measure market efficiency the authors consider the DELAY statistic, discussed in Griffin, Kelly and Nardari (2010). This is a measure of how much information about stock (or portfolio) returns comes from lagged market returns. It is defined as the difference in the R-squared of the weekly returns regressed on weekly market returns lagged by 0, 1, 2, 3 or 4 weeks and the R-squared of the weekly returns regressed on just the current weekly market returns.

The authors of the current paper examine the average DELAY for the five size quintile portfolios in the three sub-periods. The average DELAY is much lower in the sub-period 1999-2012 compared to the two earlier sub-periods for all but the largest size portfolio. This suggests that market efficiency has increased.

The main result of the paper is quite intriguing; has momentum really gone away? We provide our view using a series of back-tests across various regions in the following pages.

**Last word**

## Our replication

As always, we have attempted to make our replication close to industry practice, which leads to some differences to the method in the paper.

The first difference is the universe. Bhattacharya et al use CRSP data, but we focus just on the Dow Jones universe, which is much narrower, and look at several different regions within that universe.

The second difference is our choice of price momentum signal. The authors considered a variety of price momentum signals, but did not use a 1-month lag in their signals, which is commonly used by practitioners to avoid the well documented short term price reversal anomaly. In our analysis, we have focussed on the (12,1,1) price momentum strategy, which is one of the most popular momentum strategies. This strategy involves buying the best performing stocks from 13 months ago to 1 month ago, and holding the portfolio for 1 month.

Also, due to data constraints, our analysis begins in February 1992, so that our two sub-periods are 1992-1998 and 1999-Sep 2016.

At each month-end, for each region, we divide the universe into quintiles by our price momentum signal and market cap weight these stocks to form five portfolios. We rebalance the portfolios monthly.

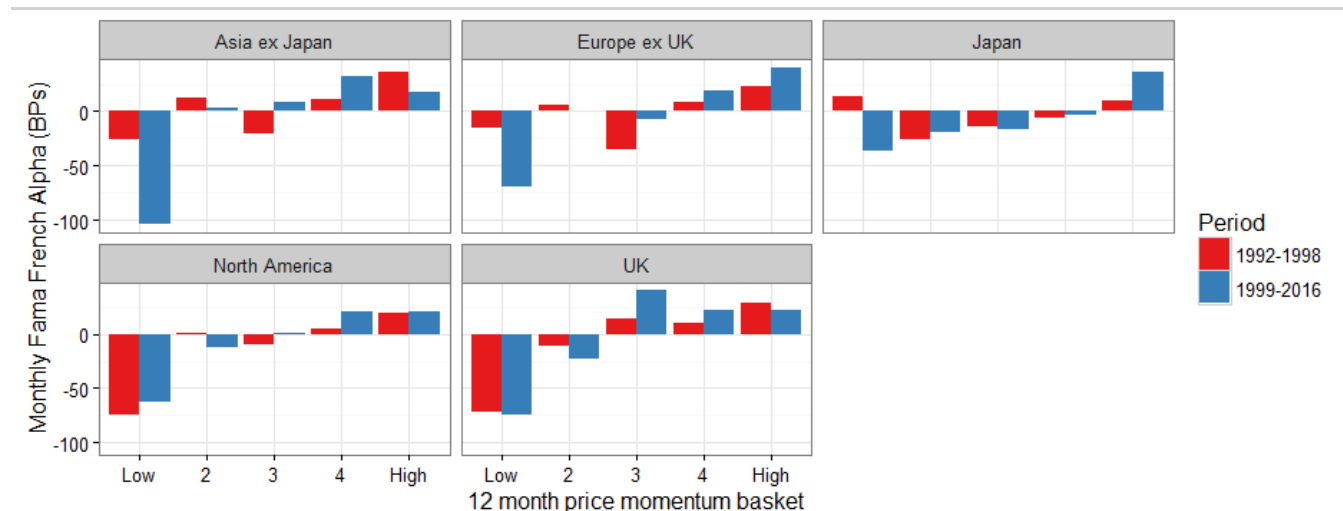
We also create two long-short (top versus bottom quintile) portfolios for size, long small-cap and short large-cap ("SMB"), and for book to price, long high book to price and short low book to price ("HML").

Using the time series of monthly returns to these portfolios we run regional versions of the Fama-French model in order to estimate the respective alphas. Figure 4 shows our estimates of the alphas to each quintile portfolio in each region and time period. Figure 5 provides the numerical values.

**12 month price momentum signal, lagged by a month**

**Market cap weighted quintile portfolios**

**Figure 4: Fama French alphas for price momentum in different regions and time periods**



Source: UBS Quantitative Research

**Figure 5: Fama-French alphas for high and low price momentum portfolios**

		Fama French Alpha (BPs)	
		1992-1998	1999-2016
Asia ex Japan	Low	-25.6	-104.1 **
	High	36.8	17.9
Japan	Low	13.8	-36.6
	High	10.3	36.4 *
North America	Low	-74.4 **	-63.0 **
	High	20.0	20.5
Europe ex UK	Low	-15.0	-70.0 **
	High	23.0	40.3 **
UK	Low	-71.8 **	-74.0 **
	High	28.9	22.6

Source: UBS Quantitative Research, "\*" indicates that a result is significant at the 10% level and "\*\*" indicates that a result is significant at the 5% level.

In sharp contrast to the authors, we do not see any significant decline in the Fama French alphas of the price momentum strategies between the two sub-periods in any of the regions, although they were not always significant.

**We do not see a decline in the price momentum Fama French alphas**



# "The Excess Returns of 'Quality' Stocks: A Behavioral Anomaly"

by Jean-Philippe Bouchaud, Ciliberti Stefano, Augustin Landier, Guillaume Simon and David Thesmar

The question of whether an "anomaly" has a behavioural or risk-based (i.e. rational) explanation (or, as we will see in the next paper, is a problem of the underlying model being misspecified) is a continuing discussion for all the anomalies in the literature. This paper by Jean-Philippe Bouchaud, Ciliberti Stefano, Augustin Landier, Guillaume Simon and David Thesmar contributes to the debate for the quality anomaly and comes down on the side of it having a behavioural justification.

Anomaly versus risk

The authors first attempt to reject the risk-based explanation for quality. Their main definition of quality is Operating Cash-Flows to Total Assets, but in their first section they also consider Return on Assets (EBIT / Total Assets) and Return on Equity (Net Income / Common Equity). They show that all three of these quality strategies in the US<sup>2</sup> have a positive (if small) skewness and a very low probability of having a return below minus two standard deviations, which they use as a measure of the likelihood of a crash; see Figure 6. Interestingly, when they construct a low volatility long-short portfolio, they find that it exhibits negative skewness. They argue that, taken together, these two facts (positive skewness for quality portfolios, negative skewness for the low-volatility portfolio) "*make the risk premium interpretation [of quality's outperformance] very unlikely*".

Quality is positively skewed and unlikely to crash, and so cannot be justified as a risk premium

Figure 6: Risk return profile of eight long-short strategies

	Sharpe Ratio	$\beta$	$\beta_-$	Skewness	$P(r_t < -2\sigma)$
Market - short rate	0.47	1	1	-0.130	0.031
Low volatility	0.43	-0.015	0.000	-0.060	0.032
Book to market	0.20	0.029	0.110	0.035	0.025
Repurchases	0.55	0.010	0.040	-0.053	0.019
Momentum	0.43	-0.410	-0.100	-0.007	0.025
Industry Leaders	0.48	-0.160	-0.140	0.008	0.029
Accruals	0.77	0.140	-0.027	0.027	0.018
ROE	0.55	-0.025	-0.033	0.021	0.010
Cash-Flows	1.20	-0.016	-0.055	0.060	0.021
ROA	0.46	-0.025	-0.054	0.080	0.010

Source: "The excess returns of "quality" stocks: a behavioural anomaly" by J.-P. Bouchaud, C. Stefano, A. Landier, G. Simon and D. Thesmar; part of Table 1, reproduced with permission. The table reports the Sharpe Ratio, market beta, beta on negative market months, a measure of skewness (mean – median divided by standard deviation), and the frequency of months with returns lower than two standard deviations.

The authors then contend that "*a more plausible interpretation*" is that investors "*systematically underweight the information contained in quality-like signals*". Or to put in another way, investors are focussing too much on other indicators such as EPS, momentum, volatility etc. To test this thesis they regress the errors in analyst return targets (price target / current price) on cash-flows over assets and find that the intercept is positive (i.e. analysts are optimistic on average), but the

Analysts neglect the information in quality

<sup>2</sup> Their long-short portfolios are built from the largest 1,500 stocks in CRSP over 1990-2012. They rank the signal from -0.5 to +0.5 which becomes the portfolio weight. This is then hedged by shorting the market using the rolling beta from the preceding 24 months.

slope is negative. In the authors' words, "*analysts, at best, neglect the information contained in cash-flow statement – or even weight it with the wrong sign*".

In more detail, the authors use the IBES data over the period 2003-2012 and calculate the average analyst price target,  $FP_{t+12}$  each month and estimate the forecast return as  $FR_{t+12} = FP_{t+12}/P_t - 1$ . From this they calculate the expectation mistake:

$$mistake = FR_{t+12} - R_{t+12}$$

where  $R_{t+12}$  is the realised return. The average mistake over the entire sample is +8% (with a median of +6%), i.e. analysts are on average optimistic.

They then run the following regression:

$$mistake_{i,t} = \beta \cdot Quality_{i,t} + controls_{i,t} + \epsilon_{i,t}$$

where the controls include various firm characteristics and a time fixed effect.

Using Operating Cash-Flows to Total Assets as their definition of quality (the results remain robust to using ROA or ROE instead), the authors find that the beta in the above regression is significantly negative (with or without controls). This effectively means that analysts make significantly larger forecast mistakes about low quality firms; put differently, analysts are on average more optimistic about low quality firms.

**Analysts make significantly larger forecast mistakes about low-quality firms**

In two further regressions the authors replace the left hand side of the above regression with either the forecast return  $FR_{t+12}$  or the realised return  $R_{t+12}$ . In the first case the beta is negative but only significant without the controls; in the second case, it is significantly positive even when volatility is included as a control variable. This latter result shows that quality is a predictor of future returns.

The authors conclude that "*the quality anomaly arises from non-optimal weighting of profitability information by analysts*". We would tend to agree with this interpretation. Much of an analyst's training is focused on how to value a company; and as such they focus their attention on whether a stock is trading below "fair value". Our most recent analysis of quality is available in [Investing in Quality](#) (April 2014) and [Extending our Quality Models to Financials](#) (March 2015). We have also touched on quality investing in two previous Academic Research Monitors (February 2014, available [here](#) and May 2015, available [here](#)).

## "The Betting Against Beta Anomaly: Fact or Fiction?"

by Axel Buchner and Niklas Wagner

Following on from the previous paper on the explanation for quality, this recent paper by Axel Buchner and Niklas Wagner puts forward a new theoretical reason for the low risk or "betting against beta" anomaly.

The low risk anomaly has attracted a large number of explanations from academia; for a summary see our recent quant monographs [Do low-volatility stocks have interest-rate risk?](#) (September 2016) and [Low-Risk Investing: perhaps not everywhere](#) (July 2015). We have also touched on low-risk investing in two previous Academic Research Monitors (December 2013, available [here](#) and February 2016, available [here](#)).

In the current paper the authors add to the list of potential explanations and propose that this anomaly is *"due to pricing errors, which arise given that the CAPM does not take non-linearities in stock returns into account"*.

The basis for their argument goes back to the Black-Scholes-Merton model which argues that the equity of a firm is a call option written on the value of firm's assets. This means that the returns to equities are non-linear – especially for firms which are highly leveraged. Hence a linear CAPM type regression may suffer from model misspecification. They admit that this observation by itself is not a new one.<sup>3</sup>

The paper then goes into a theoretical derivation of the instantaneous beta of the equity as a function of the beta of the underlying firm. This shows that the beta increases as leverage increases, and falls as the value of the firm increases. Figure 7 gives an example of how the beta changes with the amount of borrowings a firm has. Given that the value of the firm's assets changes stochastically, the beta itself follows a stochastic process.

After showing how the beta is time varying the authors then assume that the equity is correctly priced under this model and investigate the errors (i.e. the alphas) in an OLS based CAPM regression. They show that the alpha from the OLS regression,  $\alpha_{OLS}$ , can be approximated as

$$\alpha_{OLS} \approx \text{Cov}(\beta_t, R_{Mkt,t})$$

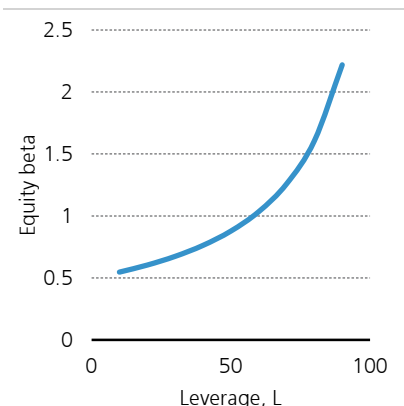
i.e. the covariance of the stock's beta with the returns to the market.

Although this expression cannot be solved analytically, it can be estimated via a Monte-Carlo simulation.

Their results show that firstly the CAPM pricing errors are always negative. This negative sign implies that betas and market returns are negatively correlated<sup>4</sup>: as the market rises the value of the assets is likely to rise, the leverage will fall and hence the beta is likely to fall.

Secondly, the errors become more negative as the leverage of the firm increases, and importantly become more negative as the beta increases: high beta names

Figure 7: Beta against leverage



Source: UBS Quantitative Research. The chart shows the theoretical equity beta for a company with assets of 100 and borrowings of L with a three year time to maturity. Risk free rates are 5%. The beta of the firm is 0.5 and the volatility of the assets is 20%.

<sup>3</sup> Schneider, Wagner and Zechner (2016) present similar arguments. See our review of their paper in our [April 2016 ARM](#).

<sup>4</sup> See the paper for the details of the simulation, but we note that they set the correlation of the firm value with the market to 0.5.

have a negative alpha. In their simulations the magnitude of the alphas is comparable to those from Frazzini and Pedersen (2014).

There is, in our opinion, a weakness in the paper. Their model (and simulation) is based on a market return and the return to the assets of the firm. These returns, plus the assumed leverage of the firm, allow them to calculate the beta of the equity to their market return. There is a problem with this structure as they assume the value of the assets of the firm is linearly related to the market. This implies that the market is actually a weighted average of asset returns rather than equity returns.

However, in practice, we do not calculate betas against a "total asset" market but, instead, against an equity market. This suggests to us that a better simulation would be to repeat their analysis in simulating the value of an equity, but repeat this a number of times to create a set of equities all of which are non-linear which could be combined to create an equity index. One should then calculate the OLS betas against this equity index rather than against the "total asset" market as used in the paper. We wonder whether one would obtain the same results as reported in the paper with this set up.

**Our view – identifying a caveat in the research methodology**

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Monographs, Keys and Q-Series		Academic Research Monitor	
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Sell	FSR is > 6% below the MRA.	15%	17%
Short-Term Rating	Definition	Coverage <sup>3</sup>	IB Services <sup>4</sup>
Buy	Stock price expected to rise within three months from the time the rating was assigned because of a specific catalyst or event.	<1%	<1%
Sell	Stock price expected to fall within three months from the time the rating was assigned because of a specific catalyst or event.	<1%	<1%

Source: UBS. Rating allocations are as of 30 September 2016.

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