Key Points

- Hedge Fund factor replication products attempt to create ‘hedge fund-like’ returns using liquid, investable factors such as equity indexes, bond indexes and commodity indexes
- These products tend to have a high correlation to equities and have delivered lower returns than widely used hedge fund indexes
- We believe that when investing in hedge funds the focus should be on alpha, with manager selection rather than capturing factor exposures being of critical importance
- We do not recommend the use of factor replication products as strategic investments

Introduction

Hedge fund replication refers to the creation of an investment product that generates returns similar to those of hedge funds—typically the returns of a proxy for the industry such as a widely-used hedge fund index. Such a product, if it performed as advertised, could offer the benefits of hedge fund investing, including diversification and return enhancement, without the relatively high cost, lack of transparency, and other risks of actual hedge funds. The basic tool used in replication is some form of returns-based style analysis originated by William F. Sharpe and built on by William Fung and David Hsieh amongst others since the late 90s, with the seminal paper of the time being ‘Can Hedge Fund Returns Be Replicated?: The Linear Case’ by Jasmina Hasanhodzic and Andrew Lo (2006). They proposed a linear six factor model for cloning hedge fund returns, using liquid exchange traded instruments. About 12-18 months after this, the first replication products appeared, created by investment banks.

This article will examine whether hedge fund replication has done a good job of providing the targeted return characteristics, and also whether those targeted characteristics are a desirable addition to an institutional portfolio.

What Is Being Replicated?

When examining a replication product, we first need to identify what it is one is attempting to replicate. There are three categories of hedge returns that one could attempt to replicate:

One possible approach is to attempt to replicate the returns of a single hedge fund. However, in practice this is almost impossible, at least for factor model methodologies. A single hedge fund can turn over its portfolio relatively quickly, and may have a number of idiosyncratic risks that cannot be easily replicated. Hence this approach is impractical.

Another, more popular, methodology is to attempt to replicate the returns of a large group of hedge funds. This is the approach that the majority of replicators follow. Most replication products will aim to track the returns of ‘a broad universe of hedge funds’, or the ‘returns of the hedge fund industry’, although others will name a specific index that they are attempting to track.
One of the advantages to the index replication technique is that although single hedge funds can be extremely nimble, an index or group of funds, containing thousands of funds, is less so, as it contains multiple decision makers. Positioning across a large group of hedge funds will move at a much slower pace than in the individual funds which comprise the index and there will often be some commonality of views. This means that a slow-moving replication approach, even one that is rebalanced monthly, may have greater success in capturing some of the returns of the index.

A final approach is to attempt to replicate the returns of a sector specific index such as equity long/short. The advantages and disadvantages are similar to replicating a broader index, although there may be other problems, such as lack of data points and difficulty in modeling certain strategies.

Methodology

There are a number of products available, mainly created by investment banks that utilize a factor replication approach. Most of these models have originated from the academic research noted above. This method attempts to decompose the returns of a group of hedge funds into a relatively small number of different predictive factors, using regression analysis. An example of a factor could be the S&P 500 Index, or the Dow Jones UBS Commodity Index. If the returns of a group of hedge funds can be broken down into such factors, and these have reasonable explanatory power, it may be possible to replicate the group using these factors. If these factors are liquid and investable it should be possible to create an investment strategy that attempts to replicate the group's performance.¹

Recently, advances have been made in this field to include more dynamic factors. The original replication models used simple, easily investable factors such as those mentioned above. Some of the new generation models use less traditional factors. Examples of these could be the slope of the yield curve (2 year – 10 year), volatility and options strategies. Some participants have also introduced adjustments to compensate for autocorrelation in certain strategies, along with other tweaks.

That is the theory. However, there have been some challenges to this approach:

- Some hedge fund strategies cannot be reasonably broken down into liquid, investable factors. The technique works quite well for certain strategies, but struggles when faced with those that have higher frequency of turnover, high convexity or esoteric exposures not easily captured by conventional factors.

- The replication strategy is always playing catch up, as it is based on historical data. It can also be relatively sluggish, as most products are only rebalanced monthly. Hence strategies with a high turnover, and mid-month inflection points in markets will be very difficult to replicate.

- Performance for most replicators has been poor. It has mostly failed to keep pace with hedge fund indexes, themselves a questionable investment proposition.

The main potential advantages to this approach are as follows

¹ Typically products will use 6-12 different factors and rebalance monthly. The algorithm will take the form
Monthly Return = x₁F₁+x₂F₂+…..+xₙFₙ, where x₁,……xₙ is the percentage weighting to each factor and F₁,……Fₙ represents the factor set. There is no requirement for x₁,……xₙ = 100% hence some products do employ leverage
- **Fees**: lower than traditional hedge fund investments and much lower than fund of hedge fund investments. This can be attractive to some participants who are deterred by the high fees associated with the industry.

- **Liquidity**: many factor replication products will offer daily or weekly liquidity, with no lock ups. This can be compared to monthly or quarterly liquidity for most hedge funds, sometimes with lock up periods and notice periods. Transaction sizes are also not an issue.

- **Transparency**: some replicators will show the exposures they have each month, which will typically be to 6-12 factors. This is in direct contrast to some hedge funds which may not wish to share their positions with investors, and whose portfolio may consist of thousands of line items.

It may be useful to compare the two approaches alongside an investment in a hedge fund:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Hedge Fund Replication</th>
<th>Direct Hedge Fund Investment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Availability</td>
<td>Few providers, although the universe is growing. Predominantly investment banks</td>
<td>Approximately 10,000 of widely differing size and quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fees</td>
<td>Typically management fee only</td>
<td>Management fee and performance fee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correlation to equities</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Variable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liquidity</td>
<td>High - daily</td>
<td>Variable – monthly/quarterly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance</td>
<td>Lower than widely used hedge fund indexes</td>
<td>Variable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide Alpha</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Variable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capacity</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Limited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investment process</td>
<td>Mainly passive with monthly reweighting</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Performance Comparison

The performance section will only focus on 'live' track records; back-tests will be excluded. We have selected five hedge fund replicators, mainly from investment banks which will have a number of investable products based on the replicators. All products use a factor replication methodology and have a live track record from June 2008 through December 2012. Returns are shown net of fees.

Figure 1: Performance of replicators and various benchmarks

Figure 1 above illustrates a number of interesting points. First, no replicator has managed to match the net of fees performance of arguably the two most common benchmarks used for hedge fund performance, the HFRI Fund Weighted Index ("HFR") or the Dow Jones Credit Suisse Index ("DJ CS").

The replicators have performed better than the HFRX Global Index ("HFRX"), which is an investable index with daily liquidity, including a subset of managers from the HFR database (approximately 6,800 funds) that are open for investment and will accept managed account investments from HFR, along with other restrictions. However in our opinion, the restrictions placed on inclusion in this index, notably ac-
ceptance of a managed account from HFRI, mean that this index is by no means representative of the performance of the ‘average’ hedge fund.

The actual benchmarks to which replication products compare themselves vary significantly. Some managers will state that the product will attempt to track a certain index and show performance against this benchmark. Others will adopt a more general statement, such as the fact that the fund will attempt to track the broad hedge fund universe. There are also those that may illustrate performance against a number of different benchmarks, representing various hedge fund indexes. Finally some may claim high correlation to a certain benchmark, and then show performance against a different benchmark that has performed relatively poorly. This can create confusion over what the replication product is attempting to replicate.

As can be seen from the above, a successful attempt to replicate a certain index could offer a much more desirable return stream than another. However, this requires a decision in advance regarding which index will perform well in the future, which can be difficult for similarly constructed indexes, and a belief in the ability of the chosen replicator to closely track the target index, which as seen in the Appendix most products have failed to do. Even if all of these challenges were met, we are of the opinion that the return of the average hedge fund, as represented by hedge fund indexes, is not a compelling investment.

Figure 2: Monthly Dispersion June 2008 – December 2012
Figure 2 shows the dispersion of annual returns from June 2008-2012. What is striking is the range of returns available from just five products that are attempting to replicate hedge fund returns. This is caused to some extent by the large dispersion in hedge fund indexes, but is exacerbated by the tracking error contained in the replicators compared to their reference index. This illustrates how a number of products which have a similar aim, which is to replicate hedge fund returns, can result in very different outcomes for the investor.

**Figure 3: Correlation to market Indexes: June 2008 – December 2012**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Correlation</th>
<th>Fund A</th>
<th>Fund B</th>
<th>Fund C</th>
<th>Fund D</th>
<th>Fund E</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S&amp;P 500 Returns</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DJ US Total Stock Market</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSCI World Ex US</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BC Agg Bond Index</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BC High Yield Bond Index</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DJ UBS Commodity Index</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Many commentators cite the fact that pension funds can obtain cheap diversification by investing in hedge fund replicators, but we are of the opinion that this is not the case. General hedge fund indexes, and as such replicators, are heavily correlated to equities; therefore the diversification benefits of investing in these products are minimal. The hedge fund universe contains a large number of managers who have a heavy long bias, and tends to be dominated by strategies with a high equity beta. As such, it is no surprise that this is the case.

A further point to highlight is the fact that we would argue that the returns of the average hedge fund are not a particularly attractive investment. Even if a product existed that could replicate the returns of a widely used index, such as the HFR, in a consistent manner, the hedge fund universe contains many funds in which an institutional investor would not realistically entertain investing. We believe it is possible to select hedge funds that are above average, by adopting a rigorous investment and operational due diligence approach.

Due to the poor out of sample performance of most hedge fund replicators, and the fact that they are attempting to replicate something that is not an attractive investment (the average hedge fund), we believe they have limited uses for institutional clients. One possible use, however, could be as part of a transition management program; cash could be invested in the replication product while suitable hedge funds are identified, with the investment being easily unwound when the cash is deployed with hedge fund managers. However, the caveat to this approach is the performance dispersion that can occur, as demonstrated in the preceding performance analysis. The expectation of a similar return to an identified hedge fund index over a short time frame may not be forthcoming.
Due to the preponderance of investment banks offering these products, there are a large amount of OTC and structured products based on the replicators. As well as fund vehicles it is possible to structure capital protected notes, leveraged vehicles and total return swaps around the products. However, there will normally be additional fees to pay for this type of structuring.

**Conclusion**

We do not recommend the use of hedge fund replication products as strategic investments, at least in their current form. There are two main reasons for this:

- **Out of sample, net of fees performance has generally been disappointing.** Despite offering flat fees generally lower than those of traditional hedge fund investments, and no performance fee, the returns generated by these products have lagged those of hedge fund indexes.
- **We are of the opinion that the typical hedge fund index is not an enticing investment.** It has high correlation to equities and little or no specific risk or alpha. Hence, the starting point of these products is flawed.

Proponents of hedge fund replication will cite various factors that supposedly make this approach a sensible alternative to direct hedge fund investing, but the arguments don't really stand up to scrutiny:

- **Fees:** fees can be low, but vary considerably between products. They range from 0.5%-1.6%, although for larger allocations the terms could be more attractive. However, net of fee returns have not matched the most widely used hedge fund indexes.
- **Liquidity:** these products do offer daily liquidity, but most institutions do not need such frequent access to capital. The investment horizon of most institutional investors can be measured in years rather than days.
- **Transparency:** the monthly exposures for each product are easily available, and are often displayed in the monthly fund literature. However, the hedge fund industry has become increasingly transparent, and investors should demand a level of transparency with which they are comfortable, up to and including position level transparency.

One area where replication could be useful is as part of a transition management program, as a placeholder prior to investment in a hedge fund for example. However, due to the dispersion of returns, great care and research would be needed prior to any investment.

We would not recommend hedge fund replication as a replacement for hedge fund exposure. The approach does not offer alpha – those returns which can be ascribed to manager skill. In fact, to date it has offered a return stream inferior to those of widely used hedge fund indexes with a notable tracking error.

Hedge funds, more than any traditional asset category, offer outsized rewards for investing in talented managers as returns are measured on an absolute rather than relative basis. In their present form, factor replication methodologies have largely failed to offer returns comparable to the broad hedge fund industry, which we believe in itself is not an enticing investment proposition.
Appendix – Individual Replicating Fund Performance and Tracking Error

This section compares individual replicators to benchmarks which they attempt to replicate. In some cases this benchmark is unclear, in these cases the replicator will be compared to all suggested benchmarks.

**FUND A – Benchmark – Composite of Investable Hedge Fund Indexes**

![Graph showing performance compared to target index]

**Performance Compared to Target Index**
Fund B – Benchmark – HFRI Fund Weighted Index, HFRX Global Hedge Fund Index

Tracking error – HFRI Fund Weighted Index

Tracking error – HFRX Global Hedge Fund Index
Performance Compared to Target Index
Fund C – Benchmark – Internally Calculated

Performance Compared to Target Index
Fund D – Benchmark – HFRI Fund Weighted Index

Performance Compared to Target Index
Fund E – Benchmark – HFR FOF Composite Index

Performance Compared to Target Index
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Contact Information

Matthew Towsey, CAIA, ACA
Senior Consultant
Global Investment Management
+44.207.086.9332
matthew.towsey@aonhewitt.com
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