

# Statistics of VIX Futures and Applications to Trading Exchange-Traded Products

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## Abstract

We study the dynamics of VIX futures and ETNs/ETFs. We find that contrary to classical commodities, VIX and VIX futures exhibit large volatility and skewness, consistently with the absence cash-and-carry arbitrage. The constant-maturity futures (CMF) term-structure can be modeled as a stationary stochastic process in which the most likely state is a contango with  $VIX \approx 12\%$  and a long-term futures price  $V^\infty \approx 20\%$ . We analyse the behavior of ETFs and ETNs based on constant-maturity rolling futures strategies, such as VXX, XIV, VXZ, assuming stationarity and through a multi-factor model calibrated to historical data. We find that buy-and-hold strategies consisting of shorting ETNs which roll long futures or buying ETNs which roll short futures produce theoretically sure profits assuming that CMFs are stationary and ergodic. To quantify further, we estimate a 2-factor lognormal model with mean-reverting factors to VIX and CMF historical data from 2011 to 2016. The results confirm the profitability of buy-and-hold strategies, but also indicate that the latter have modest Sharpe ratios, of the order of  $SR = 0.5$  or less, and high variability over 1-year horizon simulations. This is due to the surges in VIX and CMF backwardations which are experienced sporadically, but also inevitably, in the volatility futures market.

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# 1 The Volatility Index: stylized facts

Volatility futures and exchange-traded products (ETPs) are broadly traded instruments in today's markets. VIX-related exchange-traded funds (ETFs) and exchange-traded notes (ETNs), launched in early 2009, experienced exponential growth in trading volumes. There appears to be a strong appetite by institutional investors for volatility products, for the purpose of managing tail-risk and hedging, as well trading S&P500 option implied volatility as a stand-alone asset class.<sup>1</sup>

The Chicago Board Options Exchange Volatility index, VIX, ([CBOE]) is equal, at any given time, to the square-root of the value of a basket of short-term S&P500 options, in which the portfolio weights depend on the moneyness and time-to-maturity of each constituent option. The portfolio's value corresponds to the fixed leg in a 30-day variance swap on the S&P 500 Index (for details, see e.g., [Whaley1993], [CBOE]). In 2006, the CBOE launched VIX futures contracts which settle on the spot VIX and provide a means of trading volatility as a commodity.

There is no well-accepted way to “carry” or to “store” VIX for delivery against a futures contract, as one may attempt to do with index or commodity futures. The main reason for this is that the weights of the VIX basket are not known before the settlement date. Therefore, “carrying” VIX would imply dynamic trading (“rolling”) at-the-money-forward and near-the-money, constant maturity, 30-day options. The cost of such strategies cannot be calculated accurately in advance.<sup>2</sup> In the event of a sudden market shock, or the perception of an impending shock, the demand for S&P 500 puts, is met by option sellers which will raise option-implied volatilities. The lack of “storage” also implies that, once the equity market's demand for protection subsides, implied volatilities will drop likewise. The conclusion is that VIX should be much more volatile than commodities such as crude oil or equity indexes.<sup>3</sup>

The top left plot of Figure 1 displays the VIX time series from 2004 through 2016. Noticeable

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<sup>1</sup>A similar exchange-traded volatility market exists in Europe around the *VSTOXX* index, which tracks the short-term implied volatility of STOXX50, in Deutsche-Borse-XETRA.

<sup>2</sup>An additional complication for replicating VIX with options stems from the fact that VIX is defined as the *square-root* of the value of the basket, but we shall not discuss this further.

<sup>3</sup>Certain commodities, such as electricity or natural gas, are technically difficult to distribute and store. Probably for these reasons they give rise to VIX-like price spikes. On the other hand, crude oil, for example, benefits from ample storage and transportation infrastructures, so that its price volatility is primarily linked to major changes in production/delivery.

spikes in the time series are seen in October 2008 (Lehman Brothers collapse), June 2010 (Greek debt crisis), August 2011 (U.S. downgrade by Standard and Poor's), and August 2015 (Renminbi devaluation).

We find, empirically, that the time-series of VIX behaves like a stationary process. This statement can be justified statistically, to some extent, using VIX end-of-day historical values for the index. If we use the period from January 1 1990 to May 31, 2017 (6906 daily observations), Matlab's version of the Augmented Dickey-Fuller test (*adftest*) rejects the presence of a unit root, returning a DFstat=-3.0357 with critical value CV= -1.9416 and pvalue=0.0031. We point out, however, that *adftest* does not reject unit-roots over other time windows, particularly if the events of 2008 are removed from the data. We also studied the stationarity of VIX by a different method, which does not involve the parametric assumptions made in Dickey-Fuller by splitting the VIX time series into two samples and performing a 2-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnoff (KS) test on the daily differences in VIX. Figure 1 shows the results of the KS tests, which support stationarity, the histogram of VIX, and a power-law fit to the right-tail distribution. The empirical mean is 19.1, the mode is 11.98, and the right-tail can be fitted to a Pareto tail with exponent  $\alpha = -3.4$ . This shows that, as a random variable, VIX is definitely skewed to the right with a heavy tail. On the other hand, VIX has never closed below 9 as of this writing. Once again, we find that we cannot reject a unit root if the 2008 crisis is included in the portion of data before the split. Thus, statistically speaking, we may accept stationarity of VIX if we include the 2008 period in the sample, but we also find that tests conducted over smaller time windows may not be conclusive.

Taking into account the well-known theory of volatility risk-premium, [CW09], we expect that typically long-dated futures trade higher than the long-term average of VIX. On the other hand, the *most likely level* of the VIX empirical distribution is significantly lower than the average. This is consistent with the fact the futures term-structure is typically upward-sloping, or in contango. The presence of heavy tails for the VIX distribution also indicates also that, sporadically, spot VIX will be higher than its long-term average, so there are periods of backwardation of the futures curve, either partly (only for front-month contracts) or fully, across the entire term-structure. These periods of backwardation can be seen as VIX surges rapidly, driven by exogenous news and the

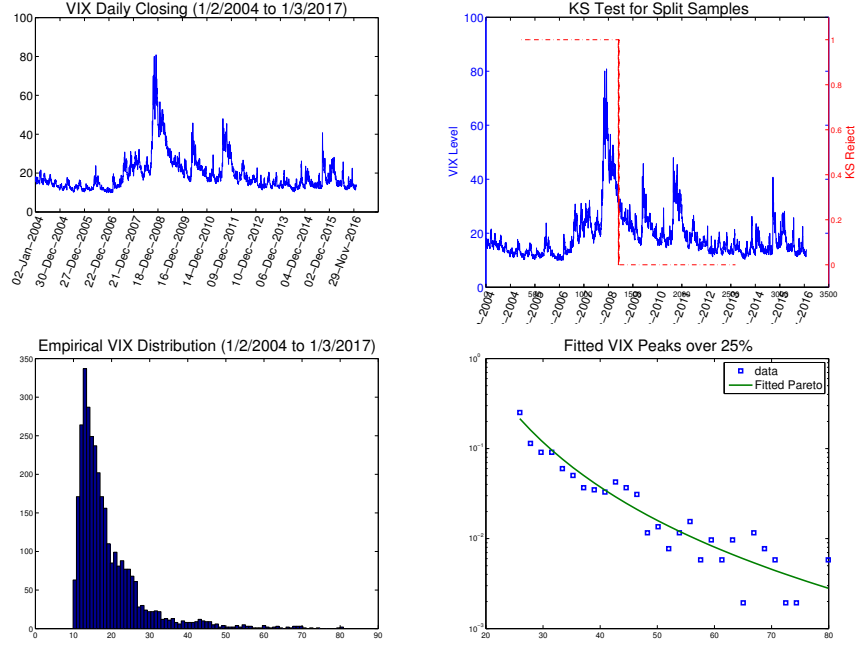


Figure 1: **Top Left:** The time series of VIX, from 2004 through 2016. **Top Right:** Two-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnoff (KS) test for the daily changes of VIX, with different splitting dates in the data. If the 2008 crisis is included in the left data sample, then KS does not reject. **Bottom Left:** Empirical distribution from VIX time series. Mean=19.1 and mode=11.98. **Bottom Right:** Fit of a Pareto density  $p(v) = c(v - v_0)^a$  to the empirical distribution of VIX values over 25 (vertical axis in log scale). Estimated parameters are  $v_0 = 5$ ,  $a = -3.4$ , and  $c = 8.8132$ .

increase in short-term option premia.

## 2 VIX Futures

Currently, VIX futures have 9 open monthly expirations as well as six additional contracts settling weekly in the front of the curve<sup>4</sup>. VIX futures provide a straightforward approach for market participants to position in 30-day forward near-the-money volatility corresponding to each of the

<sup>4</sup> This article will concern the monthly contracts, where the bulk of the liquidity is concentrated.

settlement dates.<sup>5</sup>

To capture the evolution of the VIX futures term-structure, it is convenient to work with constant-maturity futures (CMFs).<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, we define  $V_t^\tau$  as the price of a theoretical futures contract with maturity (or tenor)  $\tau$  observed at date  $t$ . In practice,  $V_t^\tau$  is defined as a linear interpolation between the two successive monthly contracts which expire immediately before and immediately after  $\tau$  years, i.e. such that their maturities “bracket”  $\tau$ . If  $\tau$  is shorter than the maturity of the first monthly futures,  $V^\tau$  is defined as the linear interpolation between spot VIX and the price of the first contract. Denoting by  $F_1$  and  $F_2$  the prices of the monthly contracts (or VIX and the first contract) which have maturities  $\tau_1$  and  $\tau_2$ ,  $\tau_1 \leq \tau < \tau_2$ , we have

$$V^\tau = \frac{\tau_2 - \tau}{\tau_2 - \tau_1} F_1 + \frac{\tau - \tau_1}{\tau_2 - \tau_1} F_2 . \quad (1)$$

If  $F_1 = \text{VIX}$  then  $\tau_1 = 0$ .<sup>7</sup> With this approach, we can build the constant-maturity futures curve from the available date on each trading date and perform statistical analysis on the data using daily observations of the curves.

Our main modeling assumption is that the time-series of CMFs is stationary: i.e. for each  $\tau$  the time series  $V_t^\tau, 0 < t < \infty$  can be modeled as stationary process.

## 2.1 Principal Component Analysis

We considered the time series of daily settlement prices from February 8, 2011 to December 15, 2016 for the 9 open monthly VIX futures contracts, which have ticker symbols VX1, VX2, VX3,..., VX9, as well as the (spot) VIX end-of-day value corresponding to each date. We discard the 9th monthly contract, after we found that VX9 is not liquid and that the settlement prices tend to be noisy and often missing. This leaves us with data on VIX and the first 8 monthly contracts. From

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<sup>5</sup>VIX futures settle in the morning of the Wednesday of the week of the third Friday of the corresponding settlement month.

<sup>6</sup>This is entirely similar to the concept of Constant Maturity Treasuries [H.15], see also [CK13] who first studied it for VIX futures.

<sup>7</sup>Clearly, linear interpolation is a possible choice but by no means the only one. Linear interpolation shall be replaced by a smooth function of  $\tau$  later on, when we introduce a parametric model for the term-structure, but there is little difference in practice, except for the somewhat annoying fact that the derivative with respect to  $\tau$  has jumps in the linear interpolation model.

this data, we constructed 8 CMFs using the linear weights as in (1), corresponding to the maturities  $\tau_j = j \frac{30}{365}$  with  $j = 0, 1, 2, \dots, 7$ , spanning from VIX ( $\tau = 0$  to 8 months. There are  $N = 1,499$  observed dates.

We considered the  $N \times 8$  data matrix

$$\mathbf{V}_{ij} = \ln(V_{t_i}^{\tau_j}) - \overline{\ln(V^{\tau_j})}, \quad i = 1, \dots, N, \quad j = 0, \dots, 7,$$

where

$$\overline{\ln(V^{\tau_j})} = \frac{1}{N} \sum_{i=1}^N \ln(V_{t_i}^{\tau_j}).$$

We performed a singular-value decomposition of the data matrix. The singular value decomposition (SVD) decomposes the centered matrix,

$$\mathbf{V} = US\psi',$$

where  $U$  is an  $N \times 8$  orthonormal matrix,  $S$  is an  $8 \times 8$  diagonal matrix containing the singular values, and  $\psi$  is an  $8 \times 8$  orthonormal matrix whose columns are the principal components used to form any given futures curve. In other words, we have

$$\ln(V_{t_i}^{\tau_j}) = \overline{\ln(V^{\tau_j})} + \sum_{\ell=1}^8 a_{i\ell} \psi_{j\ell},$$

where the coefficient matrix is  $a = US$ . Figure 2 shows the results of the PCA.

We note that this analysis differs from [CK13], where the authors used PCA to analyze 1-day log-returns; see also [LS], [Laloux et al.], and [Dobi]. In contrast, we consider here the fluctuations of the VIX futures curve around its *long-term average*. This is consistent with the mean-reversion/stationarity assumption, and the *ansatz* described above. In other words, this approach to PCA is intended to determine various curves which are needed to ‘reconstruct’ the CMF curve at any particular date, viewed as a superposition of shapes. We call this the *Equilibrium PCA*, to distinguish it from the analysis [CK13]. Equilibrium PCA provides an identikit of the VX curve,

in the spirit of image recognition: each component is seen as providing a “shape” or feature which is superimposed to the average, with a corresponding loading coefficient. Each curve in the data would correspond to a set of loadings applied to the different principal components.

We found that the first principal component accounts for 72% of the term-structure shape, adding the second component increases it to 90%, adding the third increases it to 96%, and fourth increases it to 97%. In addition, Figures 3 and 4 show poor quality for selected dates of fit when having only one component and a significant improvement from inclusion of a second. Hence, it is reasonable to consider a parsimonious model with  $d = 2$ :

$$\ln(V_{t_i}^{\tau_j}) = \overline{\ln(V^{\tau_j})} + \sum_{\ell=1}^2 a_{i\ell} \psi_{j\ell} + \varepsilon_i ,$$

where  $\varepsilon_i$  is a noise term.

Using the Equilibrium PCA we determine the *most likely CMF curve given the data*. To find it, we consider the time series of the loadings on the different shape factors  $\{a_{i\ell}, i = 1, 2, \dots, N\}$  for each  $\ell$  and calculate the mode, or most frequently observed value, for each  $\ell$ . Assuming independence (or weak dependence) between the factors, we postulate that the most likely CMF curve is

$$\text{mode}\left(\ln(V_{t_i})\right) \approx \overline{\ln(V)} + \text{mode}\left(a_{i1}\right)\psi_1 + \text{mode}\left(a_{i2}\right)\psi_2 .$$

The top plots in Figure 5 show the histograms of  $a_{i1}$  and  $a_{i2}$ , and the bottom plot shows the most-likely curve, which is clearly a contango.



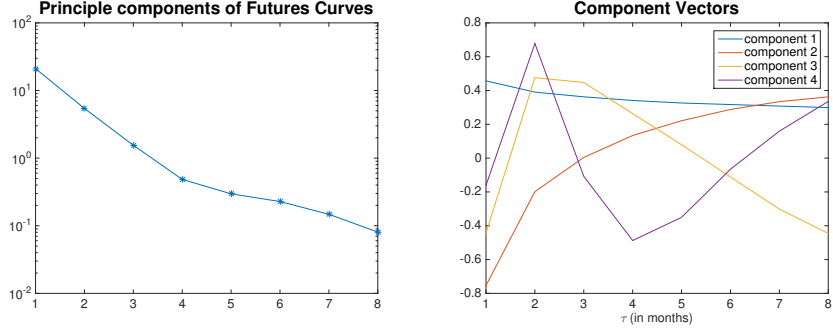


Figure 2: **Left:** For the CMFs, the singular values from the SVD’s diagonal matrix  $S$  shown on log scale. The first singular component alone accounts for 72% of variation, adding the second component increases it to 90%, adding the third increases it to 96%, and fourth increases it to 97%. **Right:** The first four singular vectors; the “zero-th”-order component is just the overall average level  $\overline{\ln(V^\tau)} = \frac{1}{N} \sum_i \ln(V_{t_i}^\tau)$ .

### 3 Rolling Futures and Exchange-Traded Notes

In a typical rolling futures strategy, positions are transferred from one expiration to another as contracts expire. Perhaps the simplest example is investing in a long position in the first contract, reinvesting all profit/losses in futures and, on the expiration date of the contract, close the long position and simultaneously open a long position for the same dollar amount in the second contract<sup>8</sup>

#### 3.1 Rolling the front-month contract

We denote the futures contract maturing at date  $T_1$  by  $F_{t,T_1}$ , where  $t$  is the current date. We consider the situation of a fund that buys a number of contracts with notional value equal to the equity in the fund, rebalances daily investing the profit/loss in futures, and rolls the entire position into the next contract at the expiration date of the current contract<sup>9</sup>. We assume that the cash in the fund is remunerated at rate  $r$  and neglect futures margin costs and other expenses. The total

<sup>8</sup>VIX futures settle in the morning of the contract’s expiration date. If we use daily close-to-close data it somewhat simpler, to roll the position at the close of the day *prior* to the futures’ expiration date. One could also let the first contract expire and open simultaneously a position in the second contract. However, the latter strategy would require intraday data for backtesting purposes. We also reinvest profits, which is consistent with the way ETN indexes are constructed.

<sup>9</sup>Rebalancing is not necessary, but it is consistent with how an ETP operates: the notional amount invested in futures is equal to the total equity of the fund at any given time.

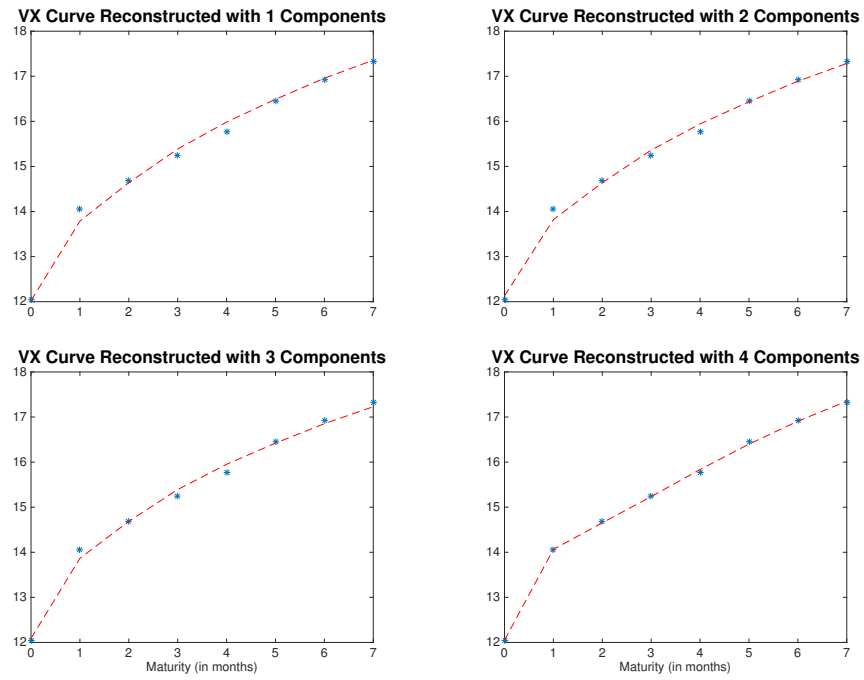


Figure 3: PCA reconstruction of VX futures curve for April 10th 2014. PCA calculated from daily VX curves from February 8th 2011 to December 15th 2016.

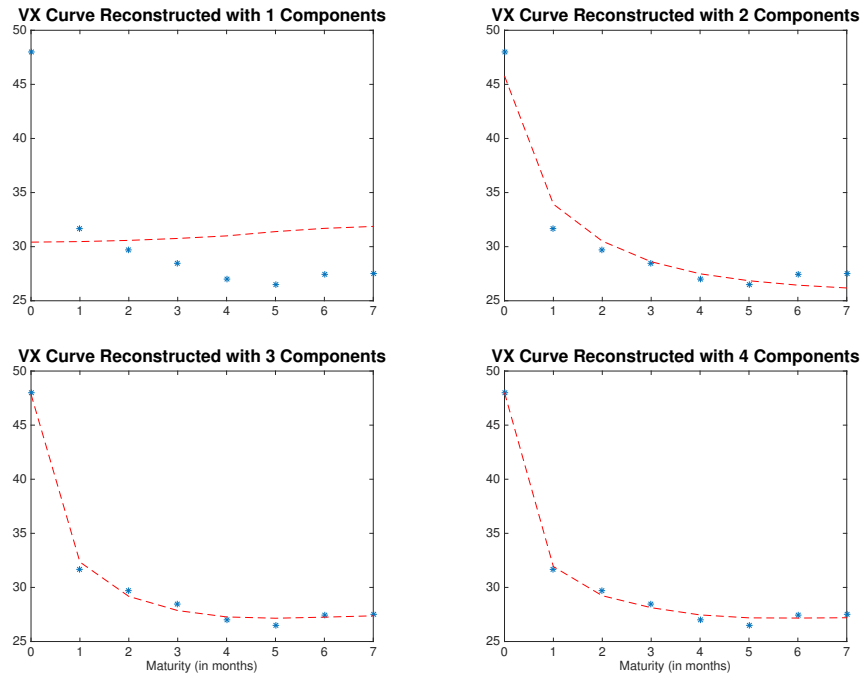


Figure 4: PCA reconstruction of VX futures curve for August 8th 2011. These curves are not those of the VIX's most-likely state, but rather a tumultuous period around the first-ever downgrade of U.S. government debt.

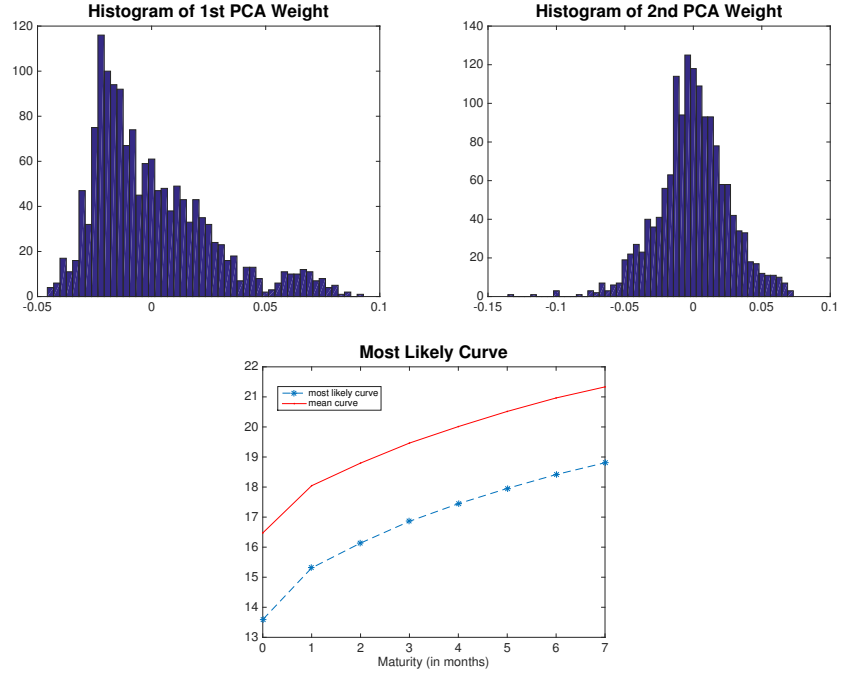


Figure 5: **Top Plots:** The histogram of weights for the 1st and 2nd principal components,  $a_{i1}$  and  $a_{i2}$  respectively. **Bottom Plot:** Recall mean VIX higher than mode VIX. Here mean curve is higher than mode curve,  $\text{mode}(\ln(V_{t_i})) \approx \overline{\ln(V)} + \text{mode}(a_{i1})\psi_1 + \text{mode}(a_{i2})\psi_2$ .

value of the fund,  $I_t$ , satisfies

$$\frac{dI_t}{I_t} = \begin{cases} \frac{dF_{t,T_1}}{F_{t,T_1}} + rdt & \text{if } t < T_2 - dt \\ \frac{dF_{t,T_2}}{F_{t,T_2}} + rdt & \text{if } t \geq T_2 - dt \end{cases},$$

(see Chapter 7 in [Ber16]). Here,  $T_1$  is the expiration date of the front contract,  $T_2$  is the expiration date of the second contract,  $r$  is the interest rate, and  $dX_t = X_{t+dt} - X_{dt}$  is the one-day change from date  $t$  to  $t + dt$ . We shall refer to  $I_t$  as the *total return index* or TRI of the strategy.

It is convenient to define the function

$$\phi(t) = \begin{cases} F_{t,T_1} & \text{if } t < T_2 - dt \\ F_{t,T_2} & \text{if } t = T_2 - dt \end{cases}, \quad (2)$$

which represents the settlement price of the front-month contract at time  $t$ . Writing

$$\phi(t) = b(t)F_{t,T_1} + (1 - b(t))F_{t,T_2}, \quad (3)$$

where  $b(t) = 1$  if  $t < T_2$  and  $b(T) = 0$  if  $t = T_2$ , we have

$$d\phi(t) = b(t)dF_{t,T_1} + (1 - b(t))dF_{t,T_2} + (F_{t,T_2} - F_{t,T_1})\delta(t - T_2)dt,$$

where  $\delta(\cdot)$  is the Dirac delta. Therefore, from equation (2) we have

$$\frac{d\phi(t)}{\phi(t)} = \frac{dI_t}{I_t} - rdt + \frac{(F_{t,T_2} - F_{t,T_1})}{\phi(t)}\delta(t - T_2)dt,$$

or

$$\frac{dI_t}{I_t} = \frac{d\phi(t)}{\phi(t)} - \frac{(F_{t,T_2} - F_{t,T_1})}{\phi(t)}\delta(t - T_2)dt + rdt.$$

Suppose that the front-month contract price follows a stationary distribution. Then, heuristically,

if the curve is in contango, rolling a long position will lose money on average and, conversely it will earn money when the curve is in backwardation<sup>10</sup>. Similar considerations apply to other rolling strategies. For instance, one could envision a strategy which rolls the futures in the middle of the month, i.e. when  $\theta + t = \frac{T_1+T_2}{2}$ .<sup>11</sup>

### 3.2 Continuous (daily) rolling

Consider a yet-to-be-determined, decreasing function  $b(t)$  such that  $b(T_1+) = 1$  and  $b(T_2) = 0$ , where  $b(t)$  represents the fraction of the total number of contracts invested in the front contract, and  $1 - b(t)$  is the fraction invested in the second-month contract. The (contract-weighted) average maturity is therefore

$$\theta(t) = b(t)(T_1 - t) + (1 - b(t))(T_2 - t) .$$

If we set  $\theta(t) = \theta = \text{constant}$ , we find that  $b(t) = \frac{T-t-\theta}{T_2-T_1}$  and  $\dot{b}(t) = -\frac{1}{T_2-T_1}$ . According to the definition of CMF futures given above, we have

$$\phi(t) = b(t)F_{t,T_1} + (1 - b(t))F_{t,T_2} = V_t^\theta ,$$

whence

$$dV_t^\theta = b(t) dF_{t,T_1} + (1 - b(t)) dF_{t,T_2} + (F_{t,T_2} - F_{t,T_1}) \frac{dt}{T_2 - T_1} .$$

In particular, setting

$$w_1(t) = \frac{b(t)F_{t,T_1}}{V_t^\theta} , \quad w_2(t) = \frac{(1 - b(t))F_{t,T_2}}{V_t^\theta} ,$$

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<sup>10</sup>This is clear if the processes are discrete or have finite variation. The assertion is also correct in the case of continuous-time diffusions, as we show hereafter

<sup>11</sup>Mid-month rolling is essentially the strategy used by the US Oil ETN, *USO*.

we obtain

$$\begin{aligned}
\frac{dV_t^\theta}{V_t^\theta} &= w_1(t) \frac{dF_{t,T_1}}{F_{t,T_1}} + w_2(t) \frac{dF_{t,T_2}}{F_{t,T_2}} + \frac{F_{t,T_2} - F_{t,T_1}}{V_t^\theta} \frac{dt}{T_2 - T} \\
&= w_1(t) \frac{dF_{t,T_1}}{F_{t,T_1}} + w_2(t) \frac{dF_{t,T_2}}{F_{t,T_2}} + \left[ \frac{\partial \ln(V_t^\tau)}{\partial \tau} \right]_{\tau=\theta} dt .
\end{aligned} \tag{4}$$

It follows that the TRI of a continuous rolling long futures strategy with average constant maturity  $\theta$  satisfies

$$\begin{aligned}
\frac{dI_t^\theta}{I_t^\theta} &= w_1(t) \frac{dF_{t,T_1}}{F_{t,T_1}} + w_2(t) \frac{dF_{t,T_2}}{F_{t,T_2}} + r dt \\
&= \frac{dV_t^\theta}{V_t^\theta} - \left[ \frac{\partial \ln(V_t^\tau)}{\partial \tau} \right]_{\tau=\theta} dt + r dt .
\end{aligned} \tag{5}$$

The daily return of the index is the sum of the daily percent change of the CMF with maturity  $\theta$  and a “drift” term which depends on the slope of the CMF curve at  $\tau = \theta$ . This term is negative if the curve is in contango and positive if the curve is in backwardation at  $\tau = \theta$ . The weights  $w_1(t)$  and  $w_2(t)$  correspond to the proportions of assets (dollar-weights) invested in each of the contracts in order to maintain a constant maturity  $\theta$ .<sup>12</sup>

### 3.3 Exchange-traded funds and notes

Most, but not all, VIX ETFs and ETNs correspond to constant-maturity rolling strategies<sup>13</sup>. For  $\theta = 30$  days, the above example corresponds to the investable index tracked by VXX, the most liquid VIX ETN. Inverse VIX ETNs and ETFs, such as XIV and SVXY correspond to rolling short

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<sup>12</sup>Because contract prices are typically different, the weights depend on the futures prices as well as on the time-to-maturity of each contract.

<sup>13</sup>For information about VIX ETNs, see [CK13] and [ETNs]

positions, *i.e.*, have total-return indexes

$$\begin{aligned}\frac{dJ_t^\theta}{J_t^\theta} &= -w_1(t)\frac{dF_{t,T_1}}{F_{t,T_1}} - w_2(t)\frac{dF_{t,T_2}}{F_{t,T_2}} + rdt \\ &= -\frac{dV_t^\theta}{V_t^\theta} + \left[\frac{\partial \ln(V_t^\tau)}{\partial \tau}\right]_{\tau=\theta} dt + rdt .\end{aligned}\tag{6}$$

In the latter case, the exposure to contango is positive: the strategy value has a positive drift if the CMF curve is in contango. Leveraged ETFs, such as *UVXY* associated with long or short front month continuous rolling are defined similarly.

Another noteworthy example of a VIX ETN which is not a simple rolling futures strategy, is the *VXZ*, which is constructed using 4 rolling contracts *VX4*, *VX5*, *VX6* and *VX7*. It corresponds to the phi-function

$$\phi_2(t) = \frac{b(t)}{3}F_{t,T_4} + \frac{1}{3}F_{t,T_5} + \frac{1}{3}F_{t,T_6} + \frac{1-b(t)}{3}F_{t,T_7} ,$$

where  $b(t)$  drops linearly from 1 to zero between  $T_3$  and  $T_4$ . The corresponding total-return index is defined by

$$\begin{aligned}\frac{dI_t^{VXZ}}{I_t^{VXZ}} &= \frac{d\phi_2(t)}{\phi_2(t)} - \frac{1}{3\phi_2(t)} \sum_{i=1}^3 \left( \frac{F_{t,T_{4+i}} - F_{t,T_{3+i}}}{T_{4+i} - T_{3+i}} \right) dt + rdt \\ &= \frac{d\phi_2(t)}{\phi_2(t)} - \frac{1}{3\phi_2(t)} \sum_{i=1}^3 V_t^{\theta_i} \left[ \frac{\partial \ln V_t^\tau}{\partial \tau} \right]_{\tau=\theta_i} dt + rdt ,\end{aligned}$$

where  $\theta_i = 90 + 30 \times i$  days. Notice that we can also view  $\phi_2(t)$  as the average of *three* CMFs, namely

$$\phi_2(t) = \frac{1}{3} \left( V_t^{\theta_1} + V_t^{\theta_2} + V_t^{\theta_3} \right) .$$

The average maturity of *VXZ* is  $\frac{\theta_1+\theta_2+\theta_3}{3} = (120 + 150 + 180)/3 = 150$  days, *i.e.* 5 months. Table 1 lists some of the VIX ETNs commonly traded in 2017.



ETN	leverage	average maturity (months)	inception date
VXX	1	1m	Jan 2009
VXZ	1	5m	Jan 2009
XIV	-1	1m	Nov 2010
UVXY	2	1m	Oct 2011
ZIV	-1	5m	Nov 2010
TVIZ	2	5m	Nov 2010

Table 1: Some of the VIX ETNs with high trading volume in 2017.

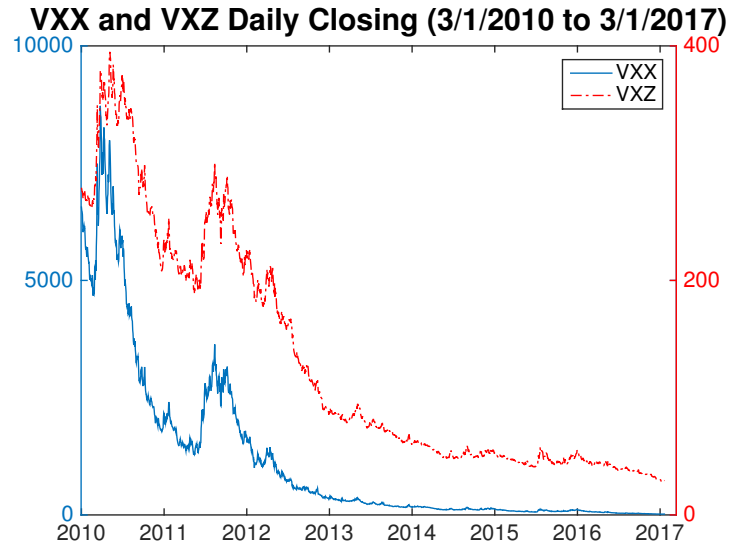


Figure 6: The historical time series of VXX and VXZ prices. The VXX rolls between VX1 and VX2 to maintain a 1-month average maturity, and the VXZ rolls between the VX4, VX5, VX6 and VX7 contracts to maintain an average maturity of 5-months. The VXZ has less volatility than the VXX because it is an average and because it rolls in longer-term contracts; the VXX rolls in 1 and 2-month contracts that are typically more volatile.

### 3.4 Integrated TRI equations and ETP buy-and-hold strategies

Next, we derive integrated form of the equations (5) and (6). By Itô's Formula, we have

$$d \ln V_t^\tau = \frac{dV_t^\tau}{V_t^\tau} - \frac{1}{2} \left( \frac{dV_t^\tau}{V_t^\tau} \right)^2, \quad (7)$$

where the last term on the right-hand side corresponds to the quadratic variation process of  $\ln V_t^\tau$ . A similar equation holds for  $\ln I_t^\tau$ . From equation (5) we also deduce that the quadratic variations of both processes are equal:

$$\left( \frac{dV_t^\tau}{V_t^\tau} \right)^2 = \left( \frac{dI_t^\tau}{I_t^\tau} \right)^2.$$

Thus, equation (5) is equivalent to

$$d \ln I_t^\tau = d \ln V_t^\tau - \frac{\partial \ln V_t^\tau}{\partial \tau} dt + r dt,$$

or, in integrated form,

$$\frac{I_t^\tau}{I_0^\tau} = e^{rt} \frac{V_t^\tau}{V_0^\tau} \exp \left( - \int_0^t \frac{\partial \ln V_s^\tau}{\partial \tau} ds \right). \quad (8)$$

In a similar vein, consider an inverse ETN which tracks a CMF with maturity  $\theta$ . If we denote this ETN (or its underlying index) by  $J^\theta$ , we have, from (6),

$$\frac{J_t^\tau}{J_0^\tau} = e^{rt} \frac{V_0^\tau}{V_t^\tau} \exp \left( \int_0^t \frac{\partial \ln V_s^\tau}{\partial \tau} ds \right). \quad (9)$$

Equations (8) and (9) display an explicit relation between the total-return indexes of ETNs for rolling futures, the constant-maturity futures and the slope of the CMF curve. The derivation of the equations for total-return index of VXZ, as well as other ETNs based on rolling a basket of futures, is left to the reader.

### 3.5 Long-time behavior of ETNs under stationarity

As an application, consider a trader who sells short an ETN tracking  $I^\tau$  and invests the proceeds in a money market account paying interest  $r$ . The market value of his portfolio at time  $t$  in dollars at time zero is ,

$$I_0^\tau - e^{-rt} I_t^\tau = I_0^\tau \left( 1 - \frac{V_t^\tau}{V_0^\tau} \exp \left( - \int_0^t \frac{\partial \ln V_s^\tau}{\partial \tau} ds \right) \right) .$$

Similarly, a trader who borrows  $J_0^\tau$  dollars and invests in the inverse ETN with maturity  $\tau$  will have a present value equal to

$$e^{-rt} J_t^\tau - J_0^\tau = J_0^\tau \left( \frac{V_0^\tau}{V_t^\tau} \exp \left( \int_0^t \frac{\partial \ln V_s^\tau}{\partial \tau} ds \right) - 1 \right) ,$$

suggesting that the trader will achieve unbounded gains by investing in the inverse VIX ETN in the long run.

If we assume that  $V_t^\tau$  is ergodic (a mild assumption in this context) then

$$\lim_{t \rightarrow \infty} \frac{1}{t} \int_0^t \frac{\partial \ln V_s^\tau}{\partial \tau} ds = E \left[ \frac{\partial \ln V^\tau}{\partial \tau} \right] ,$$

where the expectation is taken over the equilibrium measure of the CMF curve process. We conclude that:

**Proposition:** Assume that  $V_t^\tau$  is a stationary and ergodic process and that  $E \left[ \frac{\partial \ln V^\tau}{\partial \tau} \right] > 0$ . Then,

$$\begin{aligned} \lim_{t \rightarrow \infty} \left( I_0^\tau - e^{-rt} I_t^\tau \right) &= 0 \quad \text{and} \\ \lim_{t \rightarrow \infty} \left( e^{-rt} J_t^\tau - J_0^\tau \right) &= \infty . \end{aligned} \tag{10}$$

In other words, under our assumptions, shorting the long VIX ETN and going long the short VIX ETN both produce sure profits as  $t \rightarrow \infty$ .

Clearly, these theoretical profits are not free of risk. Equations (8) and (9) show that if  $V_t^\tau$  is volatile, the random variable  $\frac{V_0^\tau}{V_t^\tau}$  can be very small even if  $t$  is large. Backwardation associated

with high volatility could make  $\frac{\partial \ln V_s^\tau}{\partial \tau}$  negative as well. Hence the return of the buy-and-hold, long XIV, could be negative over any time interval  $[0, t]$ .

In order to quantify the profitability, if any, of such strategies in the real world, we resort to a simple parametric model for the evolution of CMFs. This model shall provide further insight on whether or not we can regard CMFs as being a stationary process and on the performance rolling futures strategies and trading ETPs.

## 4 A Parametric Model for CMFs

### 4.1 Lognormal Markov model for VIX

We consider a model in which  $\log(VIX_t)$  follows a multi-factor Gaussian diffusion, *i.e.*

$$VIX_t = \exp\left(\sum_{i=1}^d X_{it}\right),$$

with each factor  $X_i$  following a one-dimensional Ornstein-Uhlenbeck (OU) process

$$dX_{it} = \kappa_i (\mu_i - X_{it}) dt + \sigma_i dW_{it}^P, \quad \kappa_i > 0, \quad i = 1, \dots, d.$$

Here  $(W_{1t}^P, \dots, W_{dt}^P)$  is a  $d$ -dimensional vector of Brownian motions with correlation matrix  $\rho_{ij}$ .

According to this model,  $VIX$  is stationary with an equilibrium distribution such that  $VIX$  is log-normal, with

$$E[\ln VIX] = \sum_{i=1}^d \mu_i, \quad \text{var}(\ln VIX) = \sum_{i,j=1}^d \frac{\sigma_i \sigma_j \rho_{ij}}{\kappa_i + \kappa_j},$$

and, accordingly,

$$E[VIX] = \exp\left(\sum_{i=1}^d \mu_i + \frac{1}{2} \sum_{i,j=1}^d \frac{\sigma_i \sigma_j \rho_{ij}}{\kappa_i + \kappa_j}\right).$$

## 4.2 From VIX to CMFs

To extend this model to CMFs, we assume (see *e.g.* Cox, Ingersoll, Ross [CIR1985]) that there exists a probability measure  $Q$  and a  $W^P$ -adapted  $d$ -dimensional process  $\lambda_t$  (the market prices of risk or MPRs) such that (i) the processes

$$dW_{it}^Q := dW_{it}^P + \lambda_{it}dt \quad i = 1, \dots, d ,$$

are standard Brownian motions under  $Q$  (with correlation  $\rho_{ij}$ ), and (ii) every futures price is the expected value under  $Q$  of VIX at the corresponding expiration date:

$$V_t^\tau = E_t^Q[VIX_{t+\tau}] = E_t^Q\left[\exp\left(\sum_{i=1}^d X_{i,t+\tau}\right)\right] . \quad (11)$$

Following [CIR1985] and others, we choose the MPRs to be linear functions of the factors,

$$\lambda_{it} = p_i + q_i X_{it} ,$$

where  $p_i$  and  $q_i$  are constants. With this special choice,  $X_t$  is distributed as a multi-dimensional OU process under  $Q$ , *i.e.*

$$dX_{it} = \sigma_i dW_t^Q + \bar{\kappa}_i (\bar{\mu}_i - X_{it}) dt, \quad \text{for } i = 1, \dots, d ,$$

where

$$\bar{\kappa}_i = \kappa_i + \sigma_i q_i ,$$

and

$$\bar{\mu}_i = \frac{\kappa_i \mu_i - \sigma_i p_i}{\kappa_i + \sigma_i q_i} .$$

are new long-term mean and mean-reversion parameters<sup>14</sup>. In particular,

$$X_{it+\tau} = e^{-\bar{\kappa}_i \tau} X_{it} + (1 - e^{-\bar{\kappa}_i \tau}) \bar{\mu}_i + \sigma_i \int_t^{t+\tau} e^{-\bar{\kappa}_i(t+\tau-s)} dW_s^Q .$$

Substituting this expression in equation (11) and computing the conditional expectation, we obtain the CMF curve process under the probability  $Q$ , namely similar to [Ber05, Ber08] we have,

$$\ln V_t^\tau = \ln V^\infty + \sum_i e^{-\bar{\kappa}_i \tau} (X_{it} - \bar{\mu}_i) - \frac{1}{2} \sum_{ij} \frac{\sigma_i \sigma_j \rho_{ij}}{\bar{\kappa}_i + \bar{\kappa}_j} e^{-(\bar{\kappa}_i + \bar{\kappa}_j) \tau},$$

where  $V^\infty = \exp\left(\sum_i \bar{\mu}_i + \frac{1}{2} \sum_{ij} \frac{\sigma_i \sigma_j \rho_{ij}}{\bar{\kappa}_i + \bar{\kappa}_j}\right)$  represents the asymptotic value of the CMF curve as  $\tau \rightarrow \infty$ .

A further simplification can be made. Since  $X_{it} - \bar{\mu}_i$  has mean zero under  $Q$ , we set  $Y_i := X_{it} - \bar{\mu}_i$ . Using the relation between the  $P$  and  $Q$  measures, we derive a stochastic differential equation for  $Y_i$  in the  $P$ -measure, namely

$$\begin{aligned} dY_i &= dX_i = \sigma_i dW_t^P + \kappa_i(\mu_i - X_i)dt \\ &= \sigma_i dW_t^P + \kappa_i(\mu_i - (Y_i + \bar{\mu}_i))dt \\ &= \sigma_i dW_t^P + \kappa_i(\mu_i^Y - Y_t)dt , \end{aligned}$$

with  $\mu_i^Y = \mu_i - \bar{\mu}_i$ .

The proposed statistical model for the CMF curve dynamics is:

$$V_t^\tau = V^\infty \exp\left(\sum_i e^{-\bar{\kappa}_i \tau} Y_i - \frac{1}{2} \sum_{ij} \frac{\sigma_i \sigma_j \rho_{ij}}{\bar{\kappa}_i + \bar{\kappa}_j} e^{-(\bar{\kappa}_i + \bar{\kappa}_j) \tau}\right) , \quad (12)$$

with

$$dY_i = \sigma_i dW_t^P + \kappa_i(\mu_i^Y - Y_t)dt .$$

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<sup>14</sup>Notice that there is a one-to-one correspondence between  $(p_i, q_i)$  and  $(\bar{\mu}_i, \bar{\kappa}_i)$ . In other words, the passage from the statistical measure  $P$  and the pricing measure  $Q$  is tantamount to modifying  $\kappa_i$  and  $\mu_i$  for each factor.

**Remark:** According to this model, the equilibrium position of the CMF curve is given by

$$V_{eq}^\tau = V^\infty \exp\left(\sum_i e^{-\bar{\kappa}_i \tau} \mu_i^Y - \frac{1}{2} \sum_{ij} \frac{\sigma_i \sigma_j \rho_{ij}}{\bar{\kappa}_i + \bar{\kappa}_j} e^{-(\bar{\kappa}_i + \bar{\kappa}_j) \tau}\right).$$

### 4.3 Profitability of rolling futures strategies

We calculate the theoretical profit/loss of a rolling futures strategy with average maturity  $\tau$ . From (5), we have

$$\frac{dI^\tau}{I^\tau} = rdt + \frac{dV^\tau}{V^\tau} - \frac{\partial \ln V^\tau}{\partial \tau} dt.$$

Applying Itô's Formula to (12), we find that

$$\frac{dV^\tau}{V^\tau} = \sum_i e^{-\bar{\kappa}_i \tau} dY_i + \frac{1}{2} \sum_{ij} \sigma_i \sigma_j \rho_{ij} e^{-(\bar{\kappa}_i + \bar{\kappa}_j) \tau} dt.$$

Furthermore, differentiation of  $\ln V^\tau$  with respect to  $\tau$  in (12) yields

$$\frac{\partial \ln V^\tau}{\partial \tau} = - \sum_i \bar{\kappa}_i e^{-\bar{\kappa}_i \tau} Y_i + \frac{1}{2} \sum_{ij} \sigma_i \sigma_j \rho_{ij} e^{-(\bar{\kappa}_i + \bar{\kappa}_j) \tau}.$$

Subtracting one expression from the other and rearranging,

$$\begin{aligned} \frac{dI^\tau}{I^\tau} &= rdt + \sum_i e^{-\bar{\kappa}_i \tau} (dY_{it}dt + \bar{\kappa}_i Y_{it}) dt \\ &= rdt + \sum_i e^{-\bar{\kappa}_i \tau} (dY_i dt + \kappa_i Y_{it} dt + (\bar{\kappa}_i - \kappa_i) Y_{it}) dt \\ &= rdt + \sum_i e^{-\bar{\kappa}_i \tau} \sigma_i dW_i^P + \sum_i e^{-\bar{\kappa}_i \tau} (\kappa_i \mu_i + (\bar{\kappa}_i - \kappa_i) Y_{it}) dt \\ &= rdt + \sum_i e^{-\bar{\kappa}_i \tau} \sigma_i dW_i^P + \sum_i e^{-\bar{\kappa}_i \tau} (\bar{\kappa}_i \mu_i + (\bar{\kappa}_i - \kappa_i) (Y_{it} - \mu_i)) dt. \end{aligned}$$

We conclude that the expected value of the drift for a (long) rolling futures strategy under the stationary distribution is:

$$r + E\left[\sum_i e^{-\bar{\kappa}_i \tau} (\bar{\kappa}_i \mu_i + (\bar{\kappa}_i - \kappa_i) (Y_{it} - \mu_i))\right] = r + \sum_i e^{-\bar{\kappa}_i \tau} \bar{\kappa}_i (\mu_i - \bar{\mu}_i).$$

Setting

$$m(\tau) = \sum_i e^{-\bar{\kappa}_i \tau} \bar{\kappa}_i (\mu_i - \bar{\mu}_i) ,$$

the conclusion is that shorting the long futures ETN has positive drift if and only if

$$m(\tau) < 0 .$$

Setting

$$s^2(\tau) = \sum_{ij} \sigma_i \sigma_j \rho_{ij} e^{-(\bar{\kappa}_i + \bar{\kappa}_j) \tau} ,$$

we conclude that the Sharpe ratio of the short futures rolling strategy with constant maturity  $\tau$  is

$$\begin{aligned} SR &= - \frac{\sum_i e^{-\bar{\kappa}_i \tau} \bar{\kappa}_i \mu_i}{s(\tau)} \\ &= \frac{1}{s(\tau)} \frac{\partial \ln V_{eq.}^\tau}{\partial \tau} - \frac{s(\tau)}{2} . \end{aligned}$$

In the next section we estimate the model and provide various numerical results regarding the profitability of rolling futures strategies based on this model.

## 5 Parameter Estimation

Based on the PCA from Section 2.1 and [CK13] we consider the parametric model of Section 4 with  $d = 2$ . We estimate parameters for this model by fitting to historical futures data. The log-VIX factors can be written as

$$\begin{aligned} X_{1t} &= \mu_1 + \sigma_1 \int_{-\infty}^t e^{-\kappa_1(t-s)} dW_{1s}^P , \\ X_{2t} &= \mu_2 + \sigma_2 \int_{-\infty}^t e^{-\kappa_2(t-s)} dW_{2s}^P , \end{aligned}$$



where  $dW_{1t}^P dW_{2t}^P = \rho dt$ . The process  $(X_{1t}e^{-\kappa_1\tau}, X_{2t}e^{-\kappa_2\tau})$  is a stationary bivariate OU with mean  $(\mu_1e^{-\kappa_1\tau}, \mu_2e^{-\kappa_2\tau})$  and covariance matrix

$$\text{cov}(X_{1t}e^{-\kappa_1\tau}, X_{2t}e^{-\kappa_2\tau}) \rightarrow \begin{pmatrix} \frac{\sigma_1^2 e^{-2\kappa_1\tau}}{2\kappa_1} & \frac{\rho\sigma_1\sigma_2 e^{-(\kappa_1+\kappa_2)\tau}}{\kappa_1+\kappa_2} \\ \frac{\rho\sigma_1\sigma_2 e^{-(\kappa_1+\kappa_2)\tau}}{\kappa_1+\kappa_2} & \frac{\sigma_2^2 e^{-2\kappa_2\tau}}{2\kappa_2} \end{pmatrix},$$

as  $t \rightarrow \infty$ . Stationarity of the factors make it possible for a likelihood function with enough data to return good parameter estimates.

## 5.1 Filtering and parameter estimation

Using daily on VIX and VX contracts, we estimated the vector of parameters for the bivariate OU model to fit the CMS curve. We employed a Kalman filtering approach with parameter estimates being improved iteratively. Denote discrete daily times as

$$t_\ell = t_0 + \ell\Delta t \quad \text{for } \ell = 0, 1, 2, \dots, N,$$

where

$$\Delta t = \frac{1}{252}.$$

The input data are futures prices observed daily and CMFs are computed for each day,

$$\mathbf{V}_\ell = \begin{pmatrix} \ln(VIX_{t_\ell}) \\ \ln(V_{t_\ell}^{\tau_1}) \\ \vdots \\ \ln(V_{t_\ell}^{\tau_7}) \end{pmatrix}$$

with  $\tau_j = j \times 30$  days for  $j = 0, 1, \dots, 7$ . Let the parameters of the OU process by denoted by  $\Theta$ ,

$$\Theta = (\mu_1, \mu_2, \kappa_1, \kappa_2, \bar{\mu}_1, \bar{\mu}_2, \bar{\kappa}_1, \bar{\kappa}_2, \sigma_1, \sigma_2, \rho).$$

Using the model

$$\mathbf{V}_\ell = H^\Theta X_{t_\ell} + G^\Theta + \varepsilon_\ell , \quad (13)$$

$$X_{t_{\ell+1}} = A^\Theta X_{t_\ell} + \mu^\Theta + \Delta W_{\ell+1} , \quad (14)$$

the coefficients are

$$H^\Theta = \begin{pmatrix} 1 & 1 \\ e^{-\kappa_1 \tau_1} & e^{-\kappa_2 \tau_1} \\ e^{-\kappa_1 \tau_2} & e^{-\kappa_2 \tau_2} \\ \vdots & \vdots \\ e^{-\kappa_1 \tau_7} & e^{-\kappa_2 \tau_7} \end{pmatrix}$$

$$A^\Theta = \begin{pmatrix} 1 - \kappa_1 \Delta t & 0 \\ 0 & 1 - \kappa_2 \Delta t \end{pmatrix} \quad \mu^\Theta = \begin{pmatrix} \kappa_1 \mu_1 \\ \kappa_2 \mu_2 \end{pmatrix} \Delta t ,$$

and where  $G^\Theta = G_1^\Theta + G_2^\Theta$  with

$$G_1^\Theta = \ln(V^\infty) - \begin{pmatrix} \bar{\mu}_1 + \bar{\mu}_2 \\ \bar{\mu}_1 e^{-\bar{\kappa}_1 \tau_1} + \bar{\mu}_2 e^{-\bar{\kappa}_2 \tau_1} \\ \bar{\mu}_1 e^{-\bar{\kappa}_1 \tau_2} + \bar{\mu}_2 e^{-\bar{\kappa}_2 \tau_2} \\ \vdots \\ \vdots \\ \bar{\mu}_1 e^{-\bar{\kappa}_1 \tau_7} + \bar{\mu}_2 e^{-\bar{\kappa}_2 \tau_7} \end{pmatrix} ,$$

$$G_2^\Theta = -\frac{1}{4} \begin{pmatrix} \frac{\sigma_1^2}{\bar{\kappa}_1} + \frac{\sigma_2^2}{\bar{\kappa}_2} + 4\frac{\rho\sigma_1\sigma_2}{\bar{\kappa}_1 + \bar{\kappa}_2} \\ \frac{\sigma_1^2}{\bar{\kappa}_1}e^{-2\bar{\kappa}_1\tau_1} + \frac{\sigma_2^2}{\bar{\kappa}_2}e^{-2\bar{\kappa}_1\tau_1} + 4\frac{\rho\sigma_1\sigma_2}{\bar{\kappa}_1 + \bar{\kappa}_2}e^{-(\bar{\kappa}_1 + \bar{\kappa}_2)\tau_1} \\ \frac{\sigma_1^2}{\bar{\kappa}_1}e^{-2\bar{\kappa}_1\tau_2} + \frac{\sigma_2^2}{\bar{\kappa}_2}e^{-2\bar{\kappa}_1\tau_2} + 4\frac{\rho\sigma_1\sigma_2}{\bar{\kappa}_1 + \bar{\kappa}_2}e^{-(\bar{\kappa}_1 + \bar{\kappa}_2)\tau_2} \\ \vdots \\ \vdots \\ \frac{\sigma_1^2}{\bar{\kappa}_1}e^{-2\bar{\kappa}_1\tau_7} + \frac{\sigma_2^2}{\bar{\kappa}_2}e^{-2\bar{\kappa}_1\tau_7} + 4\frac{\rho\sigma_1\sigma_2}{\bar{\kappa}_1 + \bar{\kappa}_2}e^{-(\bar{\kappa}_1 + \bar{\kappa}_2)\tau_7} \end{pmatrix},$$

and with noise vectors

$$\begin{aligned} \Delta W_\ell^p &\sim iid \mathcal{N}(0, Q^\Theta) \\ Q^\Theta &= \Delta t \begin{pmatrix} \sigma_1^2 & \rho\sigma_1\sigma_2 \\ \rho\sigma_1\sigma_2 & \sigma_2^2 \end{pmatrix} \\ \varepsilon_\ell &\sim iid \mathcal{N}(0, R), \end{aligned}$$

where  $E\varepsilon_{\ell i}\varepsilon_{\ell j} = R_{ij}$ .

Given the history  $\mathbf{V}_{0:\ell}$ , the posterior distribution of  $X_{t_\ell}$  is normal with mean and covariance denoted by

$$\begin{aligned} \hat{X}_\ell^\Theta &= E^\Theta[X_{t_\ell} | \mathbf{V}_{0:\ell}], \\ \Omega^\Theta &= E^\Theta(X_{t_\ell} - \hat{X}_\ell^\Theta)(X_{t_\ell} - \hat{X}_\ell^\Theta)^{\text{tr}}, \end{aligned}$$

and which are given by the Kalman filter,

$$\hat{X}_{\ell+1}^\Theta = A^\Theta \hat{X}_\ell^\Theta + \mu^\Theta + K^\Theta \left( \mathbf{V}_{\ell+1} - H^\Theta (A^\Theta \hat{X}_\ell^\Theta + \mu^\Theta) - G^\Theta \right),$$

where

$$\begin{aligned}
\Omega^\Theta &= (I - K^\Theta H^\Theta) \left( H^\Theta \tilde{\Omega}^\Theta (H^\Theta)^{\text{tr}} + R \right)^{-1} \\
K^\Theta &= \tilde{\Omega}^\Theta (H^\Theta)^{\text{tr}} \left( H^\Theta \tilde{\Omega}^\Theta (H^\Theta)^{\text{tr}} + R \right)^{-1} \\
\tilde{\Omega}^\Theta &= A^\Theta (A^\Theta)^{\text{tr}} \\
&\quad - A^\Theta \tilde{\Omega}^\Theta (H^\Theta)^{\text{tr}} \left( H^\Theta \tilde{\Omega}^\Theta (H^\Theta)^{\text{tr}} + R \right)^{-1} H^\Theta \tilde{\Omega}^\Theta (A^\Theta)^{\text{tr}} + Q^\Theta .
\end{aligned}$$

We denote innovation process as

$$\nu_\ell^\Theta = \mathbf{V}_\ell - H^\Theta (A^\Theta \hat{X}_{\ell-1}^\Theta + \mu^\Theta) - G^\Theta ,$$

which is an iid normal random variable under the null hypothesis that  $\Theta$  is the true parameter value,

$$\nu_\ell^\Theta \sim iid \mathcal{N} \left( 0, H^\Theta A^\Theta \Omega^\Theta (H^\Theta A^\Theta)^{\text{tr}} + H^\Theta Q^\Theta (H^\Theta)^{\text{tr}} + R \right) .$$

Hence there is the log-likelihood function,

$$\begin{aligned}
L(\mathbf{V}_{0:N} | \Theta, R) &= -\frac{1}{2} \sum_{\ell=1}^N \left\| \left( H^\Theta A^\Theta \Omega^\Theta (H^\Theta A^\Theta)^{\text{tr}} + H^\Theta Q^\Theta (H^\Theta)^{\text{tr}} + R \right)^{-1/2} \nu_\ell^\Theta \right\|^2 \\
&\quad - \frac{N}{2} \ln | H^\Theta A^\Theta \Omega^\Theta (H^\Theta A^\Theta)^{\text{tr}} + H^\Theta Q^\Theta (H^\Theta)^{\text{tr}} + R | , \tag{15}
\end{aligned}$$

where  $\left| \cdot \right|$  denotes matrix determinant. The maximum likelihood estimate (MLE) is

$$(\hat{\Theta}, \hat{R})_{mle} = \arg \max_{\Theta, R} L(\mathbf{V}_{0:N} | \Theta, R) ,$$

where the maximization must be performed over a suitably constrained space for  $\Theta$  and  $R$ , e.g.,  $\kappa$ 's greater or equal to zero and  $R$  positive (semi)-definite.

## 5.2 Qualitative analysis of parameter estimates

The MLE for  $\Theta$  is hard to obtain because the parameter space is large and the likelihood is probably not convex; the parameter  $\Theta$  has 11 inputs and the matrix  $R$  has many more depending on the number of CMF data used. Hence, the best we can do is implement a gradient search algorithm to look for a local maximizer of the objective given by (15), and then do a qualitative analysis of the output. Our *a priori* knowledge of the future curve gives us some *a priori* intuition on the acceptable range for the model parameters', which will be an important when analyzing a possible value for  $\Theta$ .

Table 2 has  $\Theta$  estimates obtained using Matlab's 'fmincon' to search for a maximizer to the objective in (15), with input data being the daily closings of VIX and CMFs from February 2011 to December 2011 for the first set of estimates, and July 2007 to July 2016 for the next set of estimates. The table shows how the search's output depends on the input data; the output depends on the range of dates and also the choice of CMFs. Overall, these estimates indicate an equilibrium volatility for  $\ln(VIX)$  changes of 90%, and a very ephemeral and volatile second mode, which sporadically gives rise to partial or full backwardation of the CMFs. These statistical parameters appear to give rise to most shapes which were observed historically with VIX.

Overfitting can be an issue for models that have many parameters. The MLE obtained by using the Kalman filter does not overfit because of its *a priori* preference for the underlying OU dynamics of equations (13) and (14). An alternative MLE can be obtained using an ordinary least-squares estimator,

$$\hat{X}_\ell^{\Theta,lsq} = \left( (H^\Theta)^{\text{tr}} H^\Theta \right)^{-1} (H^\Theta)^{\text{tr}} \left( \mathbf{V}_\ell - G^\Theta \right),$$

but this estimator could overfit as there would be no penalization if  $(\hat{X}_\ell^{\Theta,lsq})_{\ell=1,\dots,N}$  did not resemble an OU process. After the parameter estimation is complete, then  $\hat{X}_\ell^{\Theta,lsq}$  will be a good estimator because the noise in fitting the futures curve is relatively small. Figure 7 compares the post- $\Theta$ -estimation time series of  $\hat{X}_\ell^{\Theta,lsq}$  and  $\hat{X}_\ell^\Theta$ , from which it can be seen that they are very close.

To gain a sense of the quality of fit, Figure 8 shows the residuals of the filtered model. Namely, if the model is correct and the correct parameter values used, then the innovations and the estimated

Estimated $\Theta$			
Input data: 2/2011 to 12/2016, with VIX and CMFs 1m to 7m.			
$\bar{\mu}_1$	3.8103	$\mu_1$	3.2957
$\bar{\mu}_2$	-0.7212	$\mu_2$	-0.7588
$\bar{\kappa}_1$	1.1933	$\kappa_1$	0.4065
$\bar{\kappa}_2$	10.8757	$\kappa_2$	13.1019
$\sigma_1$	0.6776		
$\sigma_2$	0.8577		
$\rho$	0.4462		

Estimated $\Theta$			
Input data: 2/2011 to 12/2016, with VIX, 3m and 6m CMFs.			
$\bar{\mu}_1$	3.8094	$\mu_1$	3.2524
$\bar{\mu}_2$	-0.7100	$\mu_2$	-0.7155
$\bar{\kappa}_1$	1.0215	$\kappa_1$	0.3219
$\bar{\kappa}_2$	10.8739	$\kappa_2$	13.0799
$\sigma_1$	0.5931		
$\sigma_2$	0.9066		
$\rho$	0.4266		

Estimated $\Theta$			
Input data: 7/2007 to 7/2016, with VIX and CMFs 1m to 6m.			
$\bar{\mu}_1$	-6.6216	$\mu_1$	-7.1367
$\bar{\mu}_2$	9.7372	$\mu_2$	9.7608
$\bar{\kappa}_1$	0.6543	$\kappa_1$	0.2010
$\bar{\kappa}_2$	5.9052	$\kappa_2$	5.9389
$\sigma_1$	0.5525		
$\sigma_2$	0.9802		
$\rho$	0.6015		

Estimated $\Theta$			
Input data: 7/2007 to 7/2016, with VIX, 1m and 6m CMFs.			
$\bar{\mu}_1$	2.4581	$\mu_1$	1.8685
$\bar{\mu}_2$	0.8002	$\mu_2$	0.7555
$\bar{\kappa}_1$	0.5505	$\kappa_1$	0.1081
$\bar{\kappa}_2$	10.0013	$\kappa_2$	12.3600
$\sigma_1$	0.4294		
$\sigma_2$	0.7998		
$\rho$	0.5073		

Table 2: **Top Panels:** Estimated  $\Theta$  using daily futures data from February 2011 to December 2016. The terminal value of the log-likelihood was around  $10^4$ . Using VIX and 7 CMFs, the long-term future value is  $V^\infty = 25.1206$ ; using VIX, the 3 month and the 6 month CMF yields  $V^\infty = 25.1202$ . The parameter search was constrained to match the VIX's statistical mode of 12.64 (i.e.  $e^{\mu_1 + \mu_2} = 12.64$ ) and the mean constrained to match the VIX's historical mean of 17.1639 (i.e.  $\lim_{t \rightarrow \infty} E_0[VIX_t] = \exp\left(\mu_1 + \mu_2 + \frac{1}{4}\left(\frac{\sigma_1^2}{\kappa_1} + \frac{\sigma_2^2}{\kappa_2} + 4\frac{\rho\sigma_1\sigma_2}{\kappa_1 + \kappa_2}\right)\right) = 17.1639$ ). The VIX mode is less than both estimates of  $V^\infty$ , which is consistent with the hypothesis of a contango equilibrium.

**Bottom Panels:** Estimated  $\Theta$  using daily futures data from July 2007 to July 2016. The terminal value of the log-likelihood was around  $10^4$ . Using VIX and 6 CMFs, the long-term future value is  $V^\infty = 27.7316$ ; using VIX, the 3 month and the 6 month CMF yields  $V^\infty = 29.2107$ . For this time period the VIX's statistical mode and mean were 13.79 and 21.56, respectively, which were the values used in constraining the parameter search to match these values. Again, the VIX mode is less than both estimates of  $V^\infty$ , which is consistent with a contango equilibrium.

$\widehat{\Delta W}_\ell^\Theta = \widehat{X}_{\ell+1}^\Theta - A^\Theta \widehat{X}_\ell^\Theta - \mu^\Theta$  should have normal distributions centered at zero. Both of these residuals are centered at zero but have heavier tails, which is to be expected when dealing with financial data. Nonetheless, the fit is useful going forward.

Finally, Figure 9 shows some CMF curves produce by the estimated parameters, one of which is the equilibrium most-likely curve and the other is a deviation from equilibrium that raises short-term VX prices. Recall the most likely curve from Figure 5 and see that the most-likely curve in Figure 9 is close.

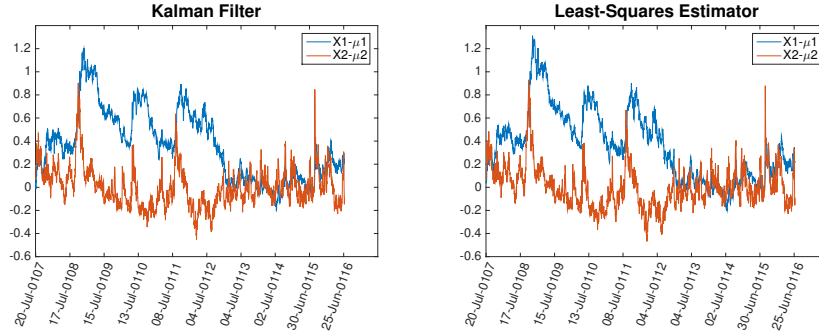


Figure 7: The Kalman filter  $\widehat{X}_\ell^\Theta$  and the least-square estimator  $\widehat{X}_\ell^{\Theta,lsq}$ , both using the estimated  $\Theta$  from the bottom left panel of Table 2. Unlike the Kalman filter, the least-squares estimator has no *a priori* preference to resemble an OU process, and hence an MLE for  $\Theta$  based on  $\widehat{X}_\ell^{\Theta,lsq}$  may overfit. However, after the  $\Theta$  estimation is complete the time series of  $\widehat{X}_\ell^\Theta$  and  $\widehat{X}_\ell^{\Theta,lsq}$  are close because the residual noise is relatively small.

## 6 Application of 2-Factor OU Model to ETNs

### 6.1 Dynamics of ETNs

Let  $I^\theta$  denote the value of a continuous rolling futures strategy with average maturity  $\theta$ . For instance, if  $\theta = 30/360$ , we can view this as a model for the VXX ETN. We assume the parameters of the model are given in Table 2 of Section 5.1. According to the results of Section 3 on rolling futures,

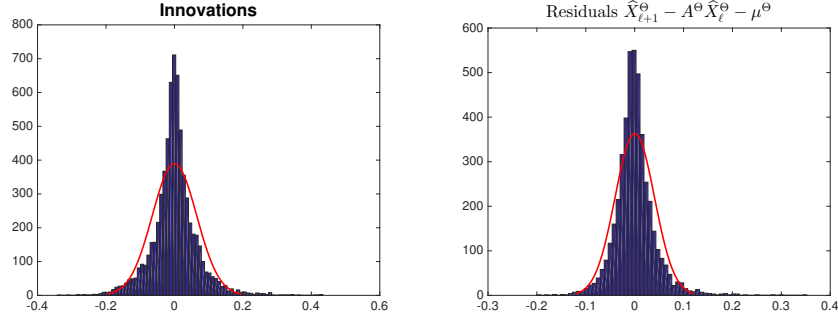


Figure 8: On the left is the histogram of the innovations  $\nu_i$  using the estimated  $\Theta$  from the bottom left panel of Table 2, along with a line that is a normal distribution with the same mean and variance. On the right is the histogram of the residuals  $\hat{X}_{\ell+1}^\Theta - A^\Theta \hat{X}_\ell^\Theta - \mu^\Theta$  for the same estimate of  $\Theta$ .

$$\frac{dI^\theta}{I^\theta} = \sum_{i=1}^2 \sigma_i e^{-\bar{\kappa}_i \theta} dW_i^P + \sum_{i=1}^2 \sigma_i e^{-\bar{\kappa}_i \theta} (\kappa_i \mu_i + (\bar{\kappa}_i - \kappa_i)(Y_i - \mu_i)) dt.$$

This is a diffusion with a stochastic drift. The distribution of  $(Y_1, Y_2)$  is Gaussian and asymptotically tend to a Gaussian distribution as  $t \rightarrow \infty$  with mean  $(\mu_1, \mu_2)$ , and covariance matrix

$$\text{cov}(Y_t) \rightarrow \begin{pmatrix} \frac{\sigma_1^2}{2\kappa_1} & \frac{\rho\sigma_1\sigma_2}{\kappa_1+\kappa_2} \\ \frac{\rho\sigma_1\sigma_2}{\kappa_1+\kappa_2} & \frac{\sigma_2^2}{2\kappa_2} \end{pmatrix}.$$

The equilibrium drift is therefore

$$m = \sum_{i=1}^2 \sigma_i e^{-\bar{\kappa}_i \theta} \bar{\kappa}_i (\mu_i - \bar{\mu}_i)$$

and the equilibrium volatility is

$$s = \sqrt{\sum_{i,j=1}^2 \rho_{ij} \sigma_i \sigma_j e^{-(\bar{\kappa}_i + \bar{\kappa}_j) \theta}}.$$

The parameter vector  $\Theta$  given in Table 2 produces curves that fit the data and which have an equilibrium most-likely curve that is a contango. In this section we take those parameters and



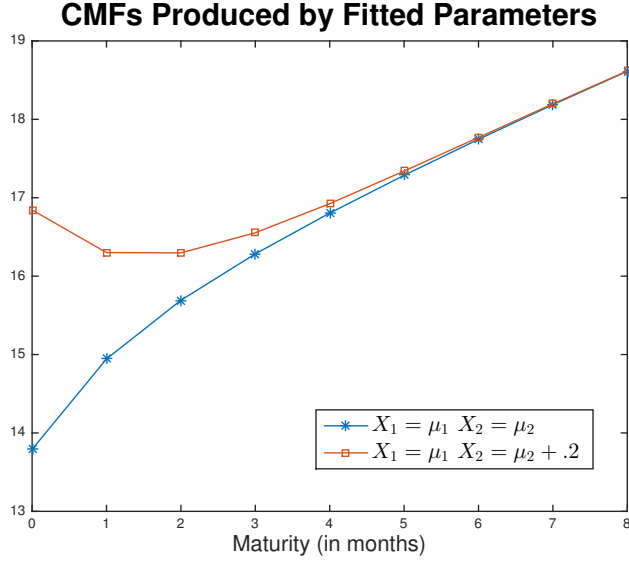


Figure 9: Two possible CMF curves produced by estimated  $\Theta$  give in the bottom left of Table 2. Taking initial factor values of  $X_1 = \mu_1$  and  $X_2 = \mu_2$  is the (statistically) most-likely curve. Taking initial factor values  $X_2 > \mu_2$  produces a curve with elevated short-term VX contracts.

simulate various ETNs that roll in VX contracts. Take a moment to remember that the  $\Theta$  of Table 2 was estimated *a priori* of any ETN returns, which is important because this section will show how the 2-factor OU model with these parameters can reproduce the historically observed statistical behavior of the ETNs.

## 6.2 Simulated one-month ETN (VXX)

The first ETN that we simulate is a 1 month ETN with a roll yield equal to the slope of the log CMF curve at  $\theta = 1$  month. For the 1M long ETN, the estimated  $\Theta$  from the bottom left panel of Table 2 yield the following equilibrium statistics are given in Table 3. Figure 10 shows a 10,000 independent sample paths from the 2-factor model along with the historical VXX. The VXX appears to lie within the bulk of these sample paths, which is an indication that the model fitted to the CMF curve is able to reproduce historical ETNs. Further analysis of the simulations is seen in the histograms of Figure 11. These histograms show a normal distribution for the distribution

1M ETN Equilibrium Statistics

$\left[ \frac{\partial \ln V_{eq}^\tau}{\partial \tau} \right]_{\tau=\theta} = 0.5178$	$m = -0.3010$
$s = 0.6585$	$SR = \frac{m}{s} = -0.4570$

Table 3: VXX equilibrium statistics given  $\Theta$  from the bottom left panel of Table 2.

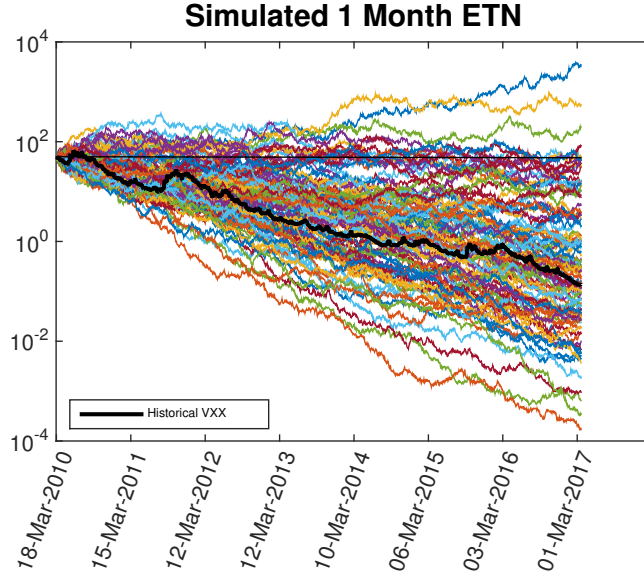


Figure 10: The simulated 1 month ETN along with the historical VXX. The VXX appears to lie within the bulk of these sample paths.

of the estimators for simulated drift, volatility and Sharpe ratios. The equilibrium statistics from Table 3 are clearly at the center of the histograms, and where the historically estimated VXX drift, volatility and Sharpe ratio of  $-0.6418$ ,  $0.6301$  and  $-1.0185$ , respectively, all of which are within (or close to) the bulk of the simulated estimators. These estimators being within their respective histogram's bulk is a statistical non-rejection of the 2-factor model by the VXX time series data.

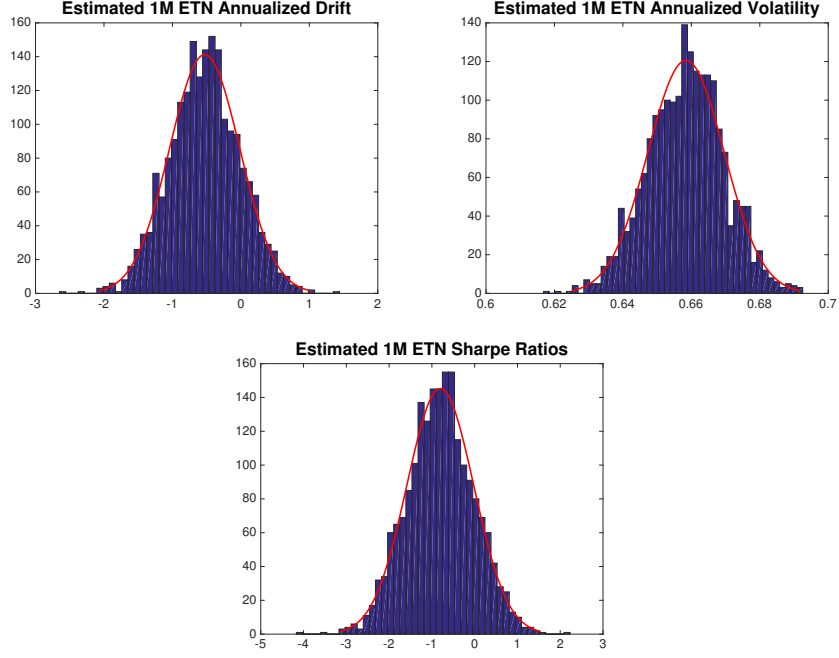


Figure 11: **Top Left:** The histogram of estimated drifts for the simulated 1M ETNs. Historically, the 1M ETN VXX recorded an estimated drift of  $\hat{m} = \frac{1}{N\Delta t} \sum_{\ell} \frac{\Delta \text{VXX}_{t_{\ell}}}{\text{VXX}_{t_{\ell}}} = -0.6418$  between 3/1/2010 and 3/1/2017, which is within the bulk among simulated drift estimators. **Top Right:** For the same time period the historically estimated volatility for the VXX was  $\hat{s} = \sqrt{\frac{1}{N\Delta t} \sum_{\ell} \left( \Delta \ln(\text{VXX}_{t_{\ell}}) - \overline{\Delta \ln(\text{VXX})} \right)^2} = 0.6301$ , which is at the edge of the bulk among simulated volatility estimators. **Bottom:** The historically estimated VXX Sharpe ratio  $\hat{m}/\hat{s} = -1.0185$ , which is within the bulk among simulated Sharpe ratio estimates.

### 6.3 Simulated five-month basket ETN (VXZ)

The second ETN that we simulate is a 5 month basket ETN with a roll yield equal to the average slopes of the log CMF curve at  $\theta_1 = 4$  months  $\theta_2 = 5$  months and  $\theta_3 = 6$  months. The equilibrium drift for this basket ETN is

$$m = \frac{1}{3} \sum_{j=1}^3 \sum_{i=1}^2 \sigma_i e^{-\bar{\kappa}_i \theta_j \bar{\kappa}_i} (\mu_i - \bar{\mu}_i) ,$$

but the volatility does not have a closed form so we estimate it empirically with simulation.

For estimated  $\Theta$  from bottom left panel of Table 2, the equilibrium statistics are given in Table

4. Figure 12 shows a 10,000 independent sample paths from the 2-factor model along with the

5M Basket ETN Equilibrium Statistics  
Given  $\Theta$  from Bottom Left Panel of  
Table 2

$m = -0.1189$	$s = 0.3504$ (empirical)
$SR = \frac{m}{s} = -0.3362$	(empirical)

Table 4: VXZ equilibrium statistics given  $\Theta$  from the bottom left panel of Table 2.

historical VXZ. The VXZ appears to lie within the bulk of these sample paths, but notice there also appears to be less volatility in VXZ than in the simulated paths. Lower volatility in VXZ is perhaps due to the fact that it is an average of contracts, and hence there is some diversification effect. Figure 13 shows histograms estimating the distribution of the estimators for simulated drift, volatility and Sharpe ratios. The historically estimated VXZ drift, volatility and Sharpe ratio are  $-0.2735$ ,  $0.3131$  and  $-0.8736$ , respectively, all of which are within (or close to) the bulk of the simulated estimators indicating a statistical non-rejection of the 2-factor model by the VXZ time series data.

## 6.4 Simulated one-month inverse ETN (XIV)

We now simulate a 1 month inverse ETN with a roll yield equal to the negative slope of the log CMF curve at  $\theta = 1$  month. The 1 month inverse ETN has equilibrium statistics that are the opposite sign as those of the 1 month given in Table 3, except for volatility which also has a positive sign. Figure 14 shows a 10,000 independent sample paths from the 2-factor model along with the historical XIV. The XIV appears to lie within the bulk of these sample paths. Figure 15 show histograms estimating the distribution of the estimators for simulated drift, volatility and Sharpe ratios. The historically estimated XIV drift, volatility and Sharpe ratio are  $0.5182$ ,  $0.6556$  and  $0.7904$ , respectively, all of which are within the bulk of the simulated estimators, and hence there is statistical non-rejection of the 2-factor model by the XIV time series data.

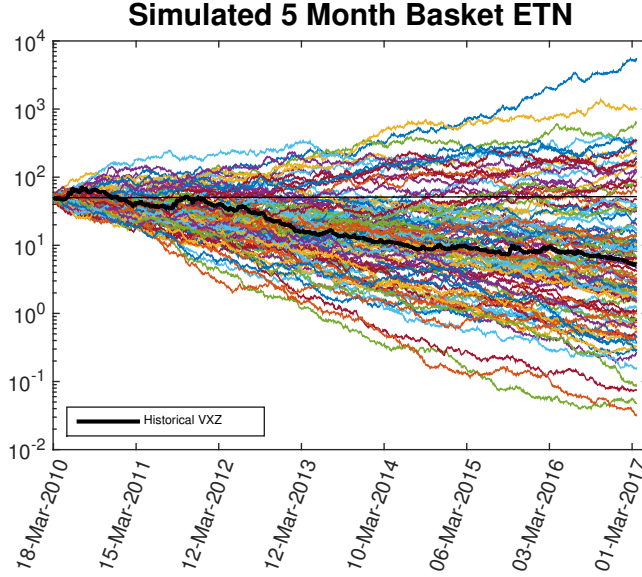


Figure 12: The simulated 5 month basket ETN along with the historical VXZ. The VXZ appears to lie within the bulk of these sample paths.

## 7 Conclusion

We quantified the statistical behavior of VIX constant-maturity-futures in terms of a stochastic model and showed how the time-series of ETP prices depend on the volatility of the CMF curve as and as its slope. Since volatility is often viewed as a stationary, or mean reverting, and the term-structure of CMF is typically in contango, shorting volatility via ETPs should be profitable, in principle. In this paper, we are able to quantify the profitability of selling VIX through ETPs. The results show that although, historically, such strategies have been profitable, the Sharpe ratios achieved are relatively modest (less than the Sharpe ratio for holding the S&P 500). This is due to the spikes in VIX accompanied by CMF backwardation which occur sporadically, but inevitably, in the volatility market.

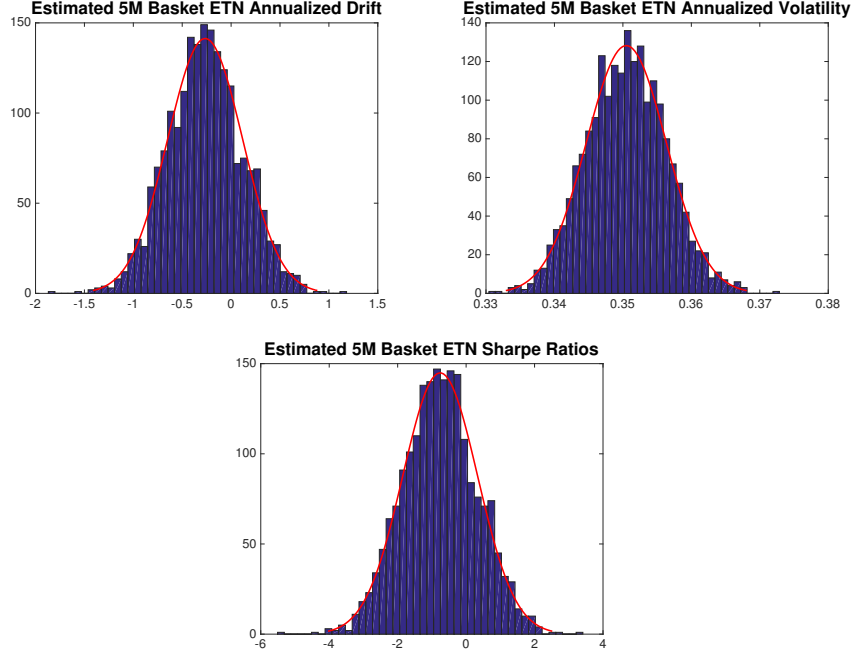


Figure 13: **Top Left:** The histogram of estimated drifts for the simulated 5M basket ETNs with equal weight of 1/3 in the 4,5 and 6 month CMFs. Historically, the 5M basket ETN VXZ recorded an estimated drift of  $\hat{m} = \frac{1}{N\Delta t} \sum_{\ell} \frac{\Delta \text{XIV}_{t_{\ell}}}{\text{XIV}_{t_{\ell}}} = -0.2735$  between 3/1/2010 and 3/1/2017, which is within the bulk among simulated drift estimators. **Top Right:** For the same time period the historically estimated volatility for the VXZ was  $\hat{s} = \sqrt{\frac{1}{N\Delta t} \sum_{\ell} \left( \Delta \ln(\text{VXZ}_{t_{\ell}}) - \overline{\Delta \ln(\text{VXZ})} \right)^2} = 0.3131$ , which is at the near the bulk of simulated volatility estimators. **Bottom:** The historically estimated VXZ Sharpe ratio  $\hat{m}/\hat{s} = -0.8736$ , which is within the bulk among simulated Sharpe ratio estimates.

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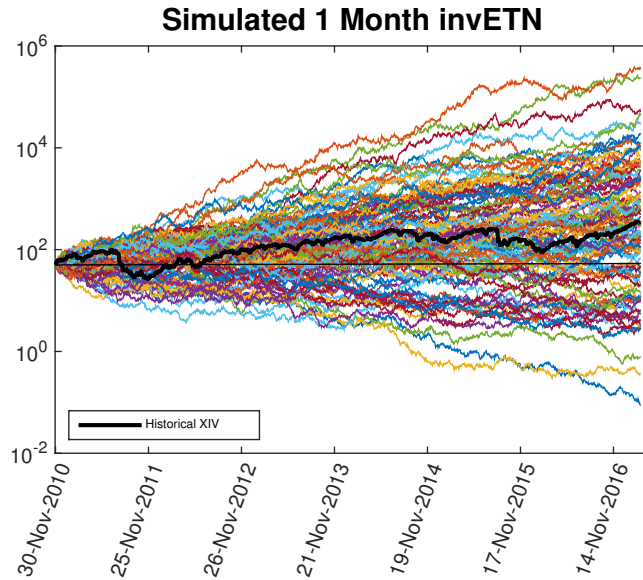


Figure 14: The simulated 1 month inverse ETN along with the historical XIV. The XIV appears to lie within the bulk of these sample paths.

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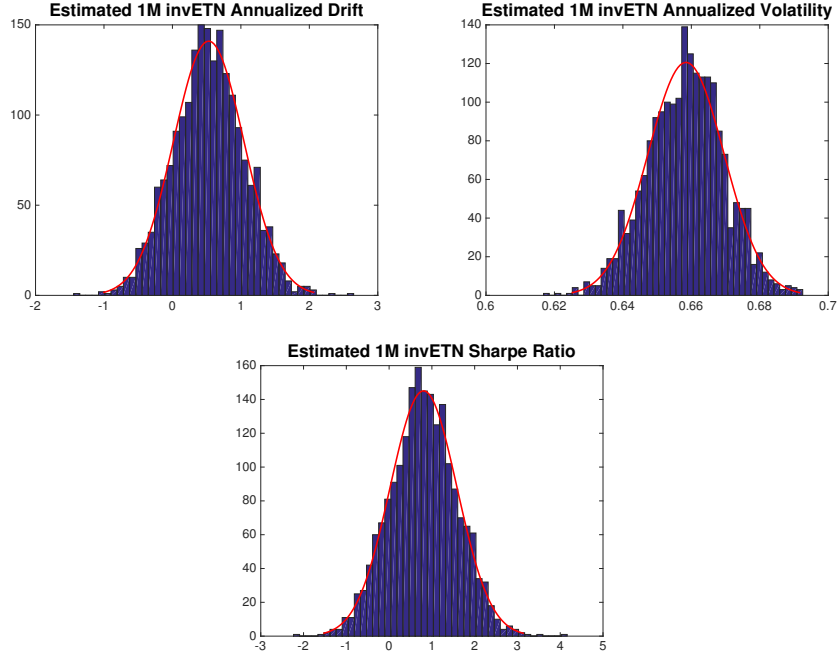


Figure 15: **Top Left:** The histogram of estimated drifts for the simulated 1M inverse ETNs. Historically, the 1M inverse ETN XIV recorded an estimated drift of  $\hat{m} = \frac{1}{N\Delta t} \sum_{\ell} \frac{\Delta \text{XIV}_{t_{\ell}}}{\text{XIV}_{t_{\ell}}} = 0.5182$  between 11/30/2010 and 3/1/2017, which is within the bulk among simulated drift estimators. **Top Right:** For the same time period the historically estimated volatility for the XIV was  $\hat{s} = \sqrt{\frac{1}{N\Delta t} \sum_{\ell} \left( \Delta \ln(\text{XIV}_{t_{\ell}}) - \overline{\Delta \ln(\text{XIV})} \right)^2} = 0.6556$ , which is within the bulk among simulated volatility estimators. **Bottom:** The historically estimated XIV Sharpe ratio  $\hat{m}/\hat{s} = 0.7904$ , which is within the bulk among simulated Sharpe ratio estimates.

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