How to Avoid the Worst Style ETFs

Question: Why are there so many style ETFs?

Answer: ETF issuance is profitable, so Wall Street keeps cranking out more products to sell.

The large number of style ETFs has little to do with serving your best interests as an investor. More reliable & proprietary fundamental data, proven in The Journal of Financial Economics, drives our research and analysis of ETF holdings and provides investors with a new source of alpha. We leverage this data to identify three red flags you can use to avoid the worst ETFs:

1. Inadequate Liquidity

This issue is the easiest to avoid, and our advice is simple. Avoid all ETFs with less than $100 million in assets. Low levels of liquidity can lead to a discrepancy between the price of the ETF and the underlying value of the securities it holds. Small ETFs also generally have lower trading volume, which translates to higher trading costs via larger bid-ask spreads.

2. High Fees

ETFs should be cheap, but not all of them are. The first step is to benchmark what cheap means.

To ensure you are paying at or below average fees, invest only in ETFs with total annual costs below 0.47%, – the average total annual cost of the 789 U.S. equity Style ETFs we cover. The weighted average is lower at 0.13%, which highlights how investors tend to put their money in ETFs with low fees.

Figure 1 shows InfraCap Equity Income Fund ETF (ICAP) is the most expensive style ETF and SPDR Portfolio S&P 500 ETF (SPLG) is the least expensive. WBI provides three of the most expensive ETFs while SPDR ETFs are among the cheapest.

Figure 1: 5 Most and Least Expensive Style ETFs

Ticker	Name	Style	Total Annual Cost
Most Expensive			
ICAP	InfraCap Equity Income Fund ETF	All Cap Value	3.36%
WBIL	WBI BullBear Quality 3000 ETF	All Cap Blend	1.85%
WBIF	WBI BullBear Value 3000 ETF	All Cap Blend	1.83%
IPDP	Dividend Performers ETF	All Cap Value	1.70%
WBIG	WBI BullBear Yield 3000 ETF	All Cap Blend	1.61%
Least Expensive			
SPLG	SPDR Portfolio S&P 500 ETF	Large Cap Blend	0.02%
BBUS	JPMorgan BetaBuilders U.S. Equity ETF	Large Cap Blend	0.02%
SPTM	SPDR Portfolio S&P 1500 Comp Stock Market ETF	Large Cap Blend	0.03%
VTI	Vanguard Total Stock Market Index ETF	All Cap Blend	0.03%
SPSM	SPDR Portfolio S&P 600 Small Cap ETF	Small Cap Blend	0.03%

Sources: New Constructs, LLC and company filings

Investors need not pay high fees for quality holdings.[1] SPDR Portfolio S&P 1500 Comp Stock Market ETF (SPTM) is the best ranked style ETF in Figure 1. SPTM's Neutral Portfolio Management rating and 0.03% total annual cost earns it an Attractive rating.[2] Euclidean Fundamental Value ETF (ECML) is the best ranked style ETF overall. ECML's Very Attractive Portfolio Management rating and 1.06% total annual cost earns it a Very Attractive rating.

On the other hand, SPDR Portfolio S&P 600 Small Cap ETF (SPSM) holds poor stocks and earns our Unattractive rating, despite having low total annual costs of 0.03%. No matter how cheap an ETF looks, if it holds bad stocks, its performance will be bad. The quality of an ETF's holdings matters more than its management fee.

3. Poor Holdings

Avoiding poor holdings is by far the hardest part of avoiding bad ETFs, but it is also the most important because an ETFs performance is determined more by its holdings than its costs. Figure 2 shows the ETFs within each style with the worst portfolio management ratings, a function of the fund's holdings.

Figure 2: Style ETFs with the Worst Holdings

Ticker	Name	Style	Portfolio Management Rating
SIMS	SPDR S&P Kensho Intelligent Structures ETF	All Cap Blend	Unattractive
IPO	Renaissance IPO ETF	All Cap Growth	Unattractive
RIET	Hoya Capital High Dividend Yield ETF	All Cap Value	Unattractive
FLCA	Franklin FTSE Canada ETF	Large Cap Blend	Unattractive
SFYF	SoFi Social 50 ETF	Large Cap Growth	Unattractive
VTV	Vanguard Value Index Fund	Large Cap Value	Unattractive
EQAL	Invesco Russell 1000 Equal Weight ETF	Mid Cap Blend	Unattractive
AWEG	Alger Weatherbie Enduring Growth ETF	Mid Cap Growth	Unattractive
VOE	Vanguard Mid-Cap Value Index ETF	Mid Cap Value	Unattractive
QQQS	Invesco Nasdaq Future Gen 200 ETF	Small Cap Blend	Unattractive
TMFS	Motley Fool Small-Cap Growth ETF	Small Cap Growth	Unattractive
VTWV	Vanguard Russell 2000 Value Index Fund	Small Cap Value	Unattractive

Sources: New Constructs, LLC and company filings

Vanguard appears more often than any other providers in Figure 2, which means that they offer the most ETFs with the worst holdings.

Renaissance IPO ETF (IPO) is the worst rated ETF in Figure 2 based on our predictive overall rating. Motley Fool Small-Cap Growth ETF (TMFS), Invesco Nasdaq Future Gen 200 ETF (QQQS), Alger Weatherbie Enduring Growth ETF (AWEG), SPDR S&P Kensho Intelligent Structures ETF (SIMS), and Hoya Capital High Dividend Yield ETF (RIET) also earn a Very Unattractive predictive overall rating, which means not only do they hold poor stocks, they charge high total annual costs.

Our overall ratings on ETFs are on our stock ratings of their holdings and the total annual costs of investing in the ETF.

The Danger Within

Buying an ETF without analyzing its holdings is like buying a stock without analyzing its business model and finances. Put another way, research on ETF holdings is necessary due diligence because an ETF's performance is only as good as its holdings. Don't just take our word for it, see what Barron's says on this matter.

PERFORMANCE OF ETFs HOLDINGs – FEES = PERFORMANCE OF ETF

[1] Three independent studies from respected institutions prove the superiority of our data, models, and ratings. Learn more here.
[2] Harvard Business School features the powerful impact of our research automation technology in the case New Constructs: Disrupting Fundamental Analysis with Robo-Analysts.

Analyzing each holding within funds is no small task. Our Robo-Analyst technology enables us to perform this diligence with scale and provide the research needed to fulfill the fiduciary duty of care. More of the biggest names in the financial industry (see At BlackRock, Machines Are Rising Over Managers to Pick Stocks) are now embracing technology to leverage machines in the investment research process. Technology may be the only solution to the dual mandate for research: cut costs and fulfill the fiduciary duty of care. Investors, clients, advisors and analysts deserve the latest technology to get the diligence required to make prudent investment decisions.

This article was originally published on October 25, 2024.

Disclosure: David Trainer, Kyle Guske II, and Hakan Salt receive no compensation to write about any specific stock, sector, or theme.

Questions on this report or others? Join our online community and connect with us directly.

It's Official: We Deliver the Best Fundamental Data in the World

Many firms claim their research is superior, but none of them can prove it with independent studies from highly-respected institutions as we can. Three different papers from both the public and private sectors show:

1. The stock market is missing footnotes – and only we have that critical data.
2. Legacy fundamental datasets suffer from significant inaccuracies, omissions, and biases.
3. Our proprietary drives novel alpha. Our measures of Core Earnings and Earnings Distortion materially improve stock picking and forecasting of profits.

Best Fundamental Data in the World

In The Journal of Financial Economics, a top peer-reviewed journal, Core Earnings: New Data & Evidence proves our Robo-Analyst technology overcomes material shortcomings in legacy firms' data collection processes to provide superior fundamental data, earnings models, and research. More details.

Key quotes from the paper:

- "[New Constructs'] *Total Adjustments* differs significantly from the items identified and excluded from Compustat's adjusted earnings measures. For example… 50% to 70% of the variation in *Total Adjustments* is not explained by *S&P Global's (SPGI) Adjustments* individually." – pp. 14, 1st para.
- "A final source of differences [between New Constructs' and S&P Global's data] is due to data collection oversights…we identified cases where Compustat did not collect information relating to firms' income that is useful in assessing core earnings." – pp. 16, 2nd para.

Superior Models

Ernst & Young features the superiority of our ROIC, NOPAT and Invested Capital research to Capital IQ & Bloomberg's in Getting ROIC Right. See the Appendix for direct comparison details.

Key quotes from the paper:

- "…an accurate calculation of ROIC requires more diligence than often occurs in some of the common, off-the-shelf ROIC calculations. Only by scouring the footnotes and the MD&A [as New Constructs does] can investors get an accurate calculation of ROIC." – pp. 8, 5th para.
- "The majority of the difference…comes from New Constructs' machine learning approach, which leverages technology to calculate ROIC by applying accounting adjustments that may be buried deeply in the footnotes across thousands of companies." – pp. 4, 2nd para.

Superior Stock Ratings

Robo-Analysts' stock ratings outperform those from human analysts as shown in this paper from Harvard Business School. Bloomberg features the paper here.

Key quotes from the paper:

- "the portfolios formed following the buy recommendations of Robo-Analysts earn abnormal returns that are statistically and economically significant." – pp. 6, 3rd para.
- "Our results ultimately suggest that Robo-Analysts are a valuable, alternative information intermediary to traditional sell-side analysts." – pp. 20, 3rd para.

Our mission is to provide the best fundamental analysis of public and private businesses in the world and make it affordable for all investors, not just Wall Street insiders.

We believe every investor deserves to know the whole truth about the profitability and valuation of any company they consider for investment. More details on our cutting-edge technology and how we use it are here.

DISCLOSURES

New Constructs®, LLC (together with any subsidiaries and/or affiliates, "New Constructs") is an independent organization with no management ties to the companies it covers. None of the members of New Constructs' management team or the management team of any New Constructs' affiliate holds a seat on the Board of Directors of any of the companies New Constructs covers. New Constructs does not perform any investment or merchant banking functions and does not operate a trading desk.

New Constructs' Stock Ownership Policy prevents any of its employees or managers from engaging in Insider Trading and restricts any trading whereby an employee may exploit inside information regarding our stock research. In addition, employees and managers of the company are bound by a code of ethics that restricts them from purchasing or selling a security that they know or should have known was under consideration for inclusion in a New Constructs report nor may they purchase or sell a security for the first two days after New Constructs issues a report on that security.

DISCLAIMERS

The information and opinions presented in this report are provided to you for information purposes only and are not to be used or considered as an offer or solicitation of an offer to buy or sell securities or other financial instruments. New Constructs has not taken any steps to ensure that the securities referred to in this report are suitable for any particular investor and nothing in this report constitutes investment, legal, accounting or tax advice. This report includes general information that does not take into account your individual circumstance, financial situation or needs, nor does it represent a personal recommendation to you. The investments or services contained or referred to in this report may not be suitable for you and it is recommended that you consult an independent investment advisor if you are in doubt about any such investments or investment services.

Information and opinions presented in this report have been obtained or derived from sources believed by New Constructs to be reliable, but New Constructs makes no representation as to their accuracy, authority, usefulness, reliability, timeliness or completeness. New Constructs accepts no liability for loss arising from the use of the information presented in this report, and New Constructs makes no warranty as to results that may be obtained from the information presented in this report. Past performance should not be taken as an indication or guarantee of future performance, and no representation or warranty, express or implied, is made regarding future performance. Information and opinions contained in this report reflect a judgment at its original date of publication by New Constructs and are subject to change without notice. New Constructs may have issued, and may in the future issue, other reports that are inconsistent with, and reach different conclusions from, the information presented in this report. Those reports reflect the different assumptions, views and analytical methods of the analysts who prepared them and New Constructs is under no obligation to insure that such other reports are brought to the attention of any recipient of this report.

New Constructs' reports are intended for distribution to its professional and institutional investor customers. Recipients who are not professionals or institutional investor customers of New Constructs should seek the advice of their independent financial advisor prior to making any investment decision or for any necessary explanation of its contents.

This report is not directed to, or intended for distribution to or use by, any person or entity who is a citizen or resident of or located in any locality, state, country or jurisdiction where such distribution, publication, availability or use would be contrary to law or regulation or which would be subject New Constructs to any registration or licensing requirement within such jurisdiction.

This report may provide the addresses of websites. Except to the extent to which the report refers to New Constructs own website material, New Constructs has not reviewed the linked site and takes no responsibility for the content therein. Such address or hyperlink (including addresses or hyperlinks to New Constructs own website material) is provided solely for your convenience and the information and content of the linked site do not in any way form part of this report. Accessing such websites or following such hyperlink through this report shall be at your own risk.