Bank credit risk and structural credit models: Agency and information asymmetry perspectives

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A B S T R A C T

This work investigates the effects of agency and information asymmetry issues embedded in structural form credit models on bank credit risk evaluation, using American bank data from 2001 to 2005. Findings show that both the agency problem and information asymmetry significantly cause deviations in the credit risk evaluation of structural form models from agency ratings. Five independent factors explain a deviation of 42.6–78.3% and should be incorporated into future credit risk modeling. Additionally, both the effects of information asymmetry and debt-equity agency positively relate to the deviation while that of management-equity agency relates to it negatively.

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1. Introduction

Bank risk evaluation traditionally focuses on a bank’s quantitative and qualitative factors according to the following aspects: capital adequacy, asset quality, management, earnings, and liquidity and funds management.1 Though these approaches shed some understanding on bank risk, a bank’s credit risk is mainly obtained from external credit ratings, which are not able to supply direct and immediate credit information about a bank’s default probability and loss given default.2 Structural form credit models (as they are able to endogenously generate default probability and, for some, loss given default) seem to be good candidates to fill this gap.3

The Merton-type structural form models share a common foundation (they all use equity value to estimate firm asset values),1 and may only reflect valuation from the viewpoint of equity holders rather than debt holders. Any effects that lead to mispricing of equity value may also influence structural form model performance. When estimating a firm’s asset value, agency and information asymmetry issues most likely cause the major discrepancy between equity and debt holders. Due to conflict of interest, the agency issue indicates that equity and debt holders value equity differently, which causes a different firm (or firm’s assets) valuation and consequently a different credit assessment of a firm. The information asymmetry between informed and un-informed traders, results in deviation from a firm’s correct credit risk assessment.4 Using American bank data from 2001 to 2005, this research empirically examines the effects of agency and information asymmetry issues embedded in structural form credit models on bank credit risk evaluation.

Several corporate finance literatures have studied manager-equity and debt-equity agency issues. Subsequent studies on manager-equity issues widely employ and develop Jensen’s (1986) free cash flow hypothesis and its related measures on two major issues: cost efficiency and profit efficiency.5 The debt-equity agency issue may have different default probabilities and loss given default.

2 Credit ratings are revised infrequently and therefore are not able to provide immediate credit information of a corporate borrower.

5 Information asymmetry between equity and debt holders has become one of the causes for agency problems.

3 Although option-based structural models face many challenges, they incorporate equity market valuation and other market factors (such as interest rate factor) or corporate characteristics (such as capital structure and payout policy) into recently developed models. The models are therefore able to include more comprehensive and up to date information for estimating a firm’s credit risk. This ability gives structural form models high potential to supply useful credit information for the bank industry.
indicates that equity holders deprive debt holders of wealth through activities such as issuing debt or investing in high-risk assets. Manager-equity and debt-equity agency issues have interactions. Jensen and Meckling (1976) mention that issuing debts reduces agency costs of outside equity and increases firm value by constraining or encouraging managers to act more on behalf of shareholders.6 Greater financial leverage may reduce management agency costs through the threat of liquidation (e.g., Williams, 1987) or through pressure to generate cash flow to pay interest expenses (e.g., Jensen, 1986). However, the opposite effect may occur to debt holders arising from conflicts between debt and equity holders, worsening the debt-equity agency problem and mitigating the manager-equity agency issues that are able to explain asymmetry and debt-equity agency effects, positively relate to APD while management-equity agency effects relate negatively to APD.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Section 2 describes the data. Section 3 gives estimation details of the four models. Section 4 presents the hypotheses. Section 5 shows empirical evidence and hypotheses examination. Section 6 discusses the implications of empirical results. Section 7 concludes the study.

2. Data

To avoid digression caused by large variations in operating characteristics within the banking industry, this investigation concentrates only on relatively pure lending and depository institutions such as commercial banks and savings and loans. Sample banks for this study are collected from those belonging to Standard Industrial Classification Codes (SIC Codes) 6021, 6022, 6029, 6035 and 6036 according to the following criteria.8

2.1. Selection criteria

2.1.1. Banks are publicly traded

Banks must be publicly traded during our sample period from 2001 to 2005 in order to estimate asset values and asset volatilities needed for performing Merton type structural form models. Banks must also have 150 daily stock price data prior to the observation date (the year-end date) of the sample period for calculating stock volatility. The current research applies this criterion with information obtained from the Center for Research in Security Prices (CRSP) database. Three hundred and eighty-nine American banks meet these requirements.

2.1.2. Banks are with credit ratings

This study uses Standard & Poor’s cumulative default rates as the benchmark for evaluating the performance of the four structural models.9 The banks’ S&P long-term domestic issuer credit ratings are obtained from COMPUSTAT. Banks that do not have credit ratings by the observation date are not included in the sample. Eighty-five banks remain in the sample screened using this criterion.

2.1.3. Banks are with sufficient market and financial data

The current work collected book values of debts from COMPUSTAT BANK, and selected only those banks with both stock price data and corporate financial data. Fifty-one banks remain after meeting the above requirements.

2.1.4. Banks are with non-ADR or non-missing value

This work eliminates banks with ADR (American depository receipt) and those with missing values.

2.2. Final sample

Thirty-eight banks remain in the final sample, after screening using the above criteria. These banks are included in the SIC codes 6021, 6022 and 6035. Table 1 shows the sample distribution and related characteristic information of sample banks. Bond rating in Table 1 is the Standard & Poor’s long-term domestic issuer credit rating in a point system, where 2 is assigned to AAA rating, 4 is AA+, 5 is AA, etc. Asset market value is estimated by an option theory-based method developed by Black and Scholes (1973) and Merton (1974). Equity volatility is annualized and derived from

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6 It could be also referred to Harris and Raviv (1991).
7 See, for example, Longstaff and Schwartz (1995), Leland and Toft (1996) and Collin-Dufresne and Goldstein (2001).
8 Industry group 602 and 603 represent commercial banks and savings institutions.
9 The details can be referred from the Financial Risk Management Handbook (Jorion, 2003).
10 The details can be referred to the definitions in COMPUSTAT database.
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