

Drake v. Universal Music Group: Navigating the clash between artistic integrity and business interests" - Elva Mohammad, UCL law with French law (UCL , Assas)

GLOSSARY-

Payola= the illegal practice of paying a commercial radio station to play a song without the station disclosing the payment to relevant authorities. Under US law, it is illegal for a radio station to practice payola as it is a violation of the Sponsorship Identification Rules, which requires any broadcast of paid material to include a disclosure

Record label = A record label is a company that manages the production, promotion, and distribution of music, often working with artists to release and market their music. Record labels are often under the control of a corporate umbrella organization called a "music group ". A music group is usually affiliated to an international conglomerate " holding company ", which often has non-music divisions as well. As such, despite both Drake and Kendrick being under different record labels, (Republic Record and Interscope Records) , both of these labels are owned by Universal Music Group.

Introduction: profit vs artistic integrity

In today's music industry, artistic success is monopolised by statistical and numerical values. Record labels play a primordial role in this, but sometimes the relationship between artists and labels can sour due to conflicting interests , like the everlasting choice between artistic integrity and profit via streams. This exact conflict is at the heart of the current legal battle between Drake and Universal Music Group (UMG), the label that represents him under its Republic Records division.

Drake , who is under Republic Records, is accusing UMG of undermining his career, by favouring Kendrick Lamar (who is under Interscope Records). The allegations stem from Lamar's diss track *Not Like Us*, accusing Aubrey of pedophilia among other things.. The Canadian rapper claims that UMG manipulated streams and artificially amplified Lamar's music as means to damage Drake's reputation, to have the upper hand in ongoing contract negotiations between the record label and Drake.

Petition in November: Laying the groundwork

The legal battle began in November 2024 when Drake filed a petition against UMG , which is not equivalent to a lawsuit but sought to compel UMG to provide evidence regarding alleged unethical practices. Drake claimed to have learned through ex-employees and online sources- such as streamer ' Akademiks' , that bots, pay-to-play schemes, and other tactics were used to artificially inflate the success of *Not Like Us*. The lawsuit condemns UMG, stating that the label used financial incentives and suppressed copyright restrictions on the track to further promote it. Moreover, Drake's legal team also blamed UMG , stating that the company fired staff that were perceived as sympathetic towards Drake. However, at that time, the case relied on limited evidence and so has been viewed more as a fact finding mission rather than a serious attempt at a lawsuit.

January: an escalation of the dispute

Skipping forward to January 2025, Drake filed a federal lawsuit, explicitly accusing UMG of defamation, allegedly the label was spreading a 'false and malicious narrative' by promoting *Not Like Us*, via a backdoor agreement between Spotify and UMG. The lawsuit claims that these actions caused detrimental reputational harm to the Canadian rapper, undermining his position during contractual negotiations, giving UMG an upper hand. This is of particular importance, as Drake no longer has a moral high ground. The lawsuit also includes disturbing implications about personal consequences of the 'beef', insinuating that three attempted break ins at Drake's Toronto manor house were a result of the cover art for *Not Like Us*, which depicted the home, exposing his address to the world notably three attempted break ins at Drake's Toronto home, as the cover art for *Not Like Us* was an image of Drake's Toronto house, effectively exposing his address to the world.

UMG has denied all allegations, asserting that they would never, as a music corporation, harm their own artist. A spokesperson for UMG stated, *"We have invested massively in his music, and our employees around the world have worked tirelessly for many years to help him achieve historic commercial and personal financial success."*

Industry implications: ethics and transparency

This lawsuit puts transparency and ethics in the music promotion on a pedestal, portraying a conflict of interests when artistic integrity is superseded by numerical value and chart positions. This issue is further exacerbated when music labels and streaming platforms collaborate closely. The repeated accusations of artificial botting of streams, and payola emphasise the need for the music industry to be more transparent on how chart success is attained. However one could also offer the argument that Drake is simply 'throwing shade' on Kendrick in an attempt to divert the attention from the mountain of allegations piled up against him.

While *Not Like Us* has earned a Grammy nomination, and Lamar was booked for the SuperBowl halftime show, Drake's lawsuit shadows these achievements, and forces the music industry to confront whether these alleged promotional practices should be continued if it comes at the price of artistic integrity.

However, UMG is categorically denying any wrongdoing, and is doubling down on their position, stating in their court filing that Drake *"lost a rap battle that he provoked and in which he willingly participated. Instead of accepting the loss like the unbothered rap artist he often claims to be, he has sued his own record label in a misguided attempt to solve his wounds."*

Certainly, *"they not like us."*

References and Further Reading

[Drake-Kendrick Lamar Feud: Drake Claims Bots Inflated 'Not Like Us' In Legal Notice](#)

[Drake files federal lawsuit accusing UMG of defamation over promotion of Kendrick Lamar's 'Not Like Us'](#)

[Payola: exploring the dark practice of bribing radio stations](#)

[UMG Files Motion to Dismiss Drake's Lawsuit – The State Times](#)