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September 2026

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New finds this week

The opening of Class 33 in the UAE is more than a technical change in trademark practice. It illustrates how intellectual property systems can adapt to global commerce while continuing to operate within distinct cultural and regulatory environments. By separating the availability of trademark protection from the regulation of the underlying products, the development shows how international harmonisation and domestic values can coexist within the same legal framework.



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New finds this week

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TRADEMARKS ACROSS CULTURES

Overview

The United Arab Emirates' decision to begin accepting trademark applications in Class 33 for alcoholic beverages marks a significant development in international intellectual property practice. For the first time, producers of wines, spirits and other alcoholic beverages can seek direct trademark protection for these products through the UAE national system.

Until recently, Class 33 was unavailable for trade mark registration in the UAE. Brand owners therefore had to consider alternative filing strategies, including protection in related classes. The new practice brings the UAE trademark system more closely into line with the international Nice Classification, under which Class 33 covers alcoholic beverages other than beer. Importantly, the change concerns trade mark protection and does not itself alter the UAE rules governing the importation, distribution or sale of alcohol.

Beyond its immediate importance for beverage companies, the development raises a broader question for international intellectual property practice: how can countries participate in increasingly harmonised global IP systems while maintaining laws and policies that reflect their own cultural, religious and social conditions?



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Intellectual Property Within Cultural Boundaries

Intellectual property laws are increasingly international in structure. Trademarks are classified under common systems, businesses operate across borders, and international registration mechanisms make it possible to manage portfolios covering numerous jurisdictions. Yet trademark rights remain territorial, and their registration and enforcement ultimately depend on national law.

The UAE provides a particularly clear example of this interaction. Alcohol occupies a different cultural and regulatory position in the UAE from that in many other markets. The historical absence of Class 33 demonstrated how national trademark practice could reflect domestic considerations even where the international Nice Classification recognised the relevant category.

The opening of Class 33 does not mean that these cultural considerations have disappeared. Rather, it draws a clearer distinction between two legal questions: whether a brand associated with alcoholic beverages can receive trademark protection and whether the underlying products can lawfully be imported, distributed or sold.

This distinction is important because trademark registration does not itself authorise commercial activity. A registered mark provides rights in a brand or sign, while the business must separately comply with the regulatory framework governing the relevant products. The UAE development can therefore be viewed not simply as a change concerning alcohol, but as an evolution in how its legal system accommodates intellectual property associated with internationally traded goods.

Global Systems and Local Values

The development also demonstrates why international IP harmonisation does not necessarily result in identical national laws.

International frameworks have made trademark systems considerably more interconnected. The Nice Classification provides a common structure for categorising goods and services, while mechanisms such as the Madrid System facilitate international trademark protection across multiple jurisdictions. Nevertheless, these frameworks operate alongside domestic law rather than replacing it.

Countries continue to determine whether particular signs can be registered, how public policy considerations are applied and how intellectual property rights interact with local regulatory requirements. These differences become particularly visible where IP intersects with cultural or social values.

Alcohol is one example, but similar issues can arise in relation to religious symbols, traditional cultural expressions and other goods or signs whose social or legal treatment varies between jurisdictions. A product or brand that is commercially ordinary in one market may therefore encounter very different legal considerations in another.

For international businesses, a global trademark strategy cannot simply reproduce the same approach in every country. Effective protection requires an understanding not only of international filing systems but also of the cultural, regulatory and legal environment in which the rights will exist.

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A Relevant Development for Vietnam

The UAE development is particularly timely from a Vietnamese perspective. Vietnam has become increasingly integrated into international trade and intellectual property systems through multilateral treaties and an expanding network of free trade agreements. The Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement between Vietnam and the UAE, which entered into force on February 03, 2026, adds another important dimension to this process.

Deeper economic links between the two countries can create new opportunities for Vietnamese businesses in the UAE and the wider Middle Eastern market. However, increased market access also increases the importance of protecting the intellectual property that accompanies Vietnamese products abroad.

When businesses enter a new export market, their trademarks, packaging, product names and other brand assets travel with their goods. Commercial expansion without corresponding IP protection can expose businesses to conflicting registrations, imitation and difficulties involving distributors or local partners.

The opening of Class 33 is especially relevant to Vietnamese producers of products falling within this category, including wines, spirits and certain traditional alcoholic beverages. These businesses now have a clearer route to seek trademark protection for the relevant goods in the UAE. At the same time, they must distinguish between obtaining intellectual property rights and complying with the separate regulatory requirements governing the commercialisation of those products.

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Culture and International Integration

The UAE experience also provides a broader perspective for Vietnam as international economic integration continues. Participation in global trade does not require countries to abandon their own cultural traditions, social priorities or regulatory policies. Instead, the challenge is to develop legal frameworks capable of interacting effectively with international systems while preserving appropriate space for domestic policy choices.

This balance is particularly relevant to intellectual property because brands and creative assets often carry cultural meaning. Words, images, symbols, geographical references and even categories of goods can be understood differently across societies. As Vietnamese businesses expand internationally, cultural awareness therefore becomes an increasingly important part of IP strategy.

The same principle applies to foreign companies entering Vietnam. International agreements can facilitate trade and IP protection, but businesses must still understand Vietnamese law and the local environment. International integration consequently increases rather than eliminates the need for jurisdiction-specific advice.

The UAE example demonstrates that a country can move towards greater compatibility with international IP practices while maintaining separate domestic rules reflecting its own regulatory and cultural context. This approach highlights an important feature of modern international IP law: harmonisation can create common structures without requiring complete legal or cultural uniformity.



Conclusion

The opening of Class 33 in the UAE is more than a technical change in trademark practice. It illustrates how intellectual property systems can adapt to global commerce while continuing to operate within distinct cultural and regulatory environments. By separating the availability of trademark protection from the regulation of the underlying products, the development shows how international harmonisation and domestic values can coexist within the same legal framework.

For Vietnam, this experience is increasingly relevant as deeper international integration creates opportunities for Vietnamese brands in markets with different legal and cultural characteristics. International frameworks can make cross-border protection easier, but successful IP strategies will still depend on understanding the particular rules and values of each jurisdiction. As Vietnam becomes more closely connected with global markets, balancing international compatibility with local context will remain an important part of both IP policy and business strategy.

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