DTMx Insights—UAE

Creative Intelligence Approach

Cultural Context

The UAE represents one of Coca-Cola's most complex and opportunity-rich markets globally; a hyper-diverse, tourism-driven economy of 11.3 million people (88.5% expatriates from 200+ nationalities) where extreme climate, Islamic cultural norms, luxury consumer expectations, and rapid regulatory change converge to create a market unlike any other.

Key Cultural Distinctions for Beverages

Hyper-diverse, expat-dominant population—88.5% of the population are expatriates. Indians (~4.4 million, 38%), Pakistanis (~1.9 million, 17%), Bangladeshis, Filipinos (~780,000), Iranians, and Egyptians form the largest communities, with Western expats at approximately 5%. The median age is 33.6. Every activation must speak to a radically multicultural audience. The 2025 Share a Coke campaign's 180+ names in Arabic, Hindi/Urdu, Tamil, and English ("Habibi," "Bhai," "Macha," "Bestie") exemplifies this imperative.

Tourism as an economic engine—Dubai welcomed 19.59M international overnight visitors in 2025 (+5% YoY); hotel occupancy reached 80.7%. Top source markets: India (2.2M), Oman, Saudi Arabia, the UK, and Russia. Premium spend rises in resorts and clubs, but regional tensions can disrupt aviation and sentiment.

HoReCa first—Hotels, restaurants, cafés, cafeterias, and casual dining are the highest-leverage activation channels because they reach consumers where they actually drink—away from home, in heat-driven impulse moments, and within high-frequency dining routines.

Hypermarkets for scale—Reserve genuinely large-scale brand theater for **hypermarkets**, which are the only retail environments with the footprint, governance, and shopper traffic to support full bays, floor islands, pallet programs, and major retail-media takeovers—especially during Ramadan.

Brunch as a weekend ritual— Weekend brunch is the UAE's signature social ritual—a 3–4 hour, tiered-beverage occasion embedded in hotel and restaurant culture weekly, making it one of Coca-Cola's most reliable recurring on-trade volume moments.

Ramadan as the commercial mega-season—Ramadan is the most economically significant period for the UAE's F&B industry, with sales spiking 15% compared with other months. Hotel buffet bookings increase by 30%. Hydrating beverages see a 25% increase in demand. The fasting-to-feasting cycle concentrates massive beverage demand at iftar (sunset fast-breaking) and suhoor (pre-dawn social dining). Supermarkets undergo wholesale physical transformation with dedicated Ramadan promotional bays.

Polarized income, dual consumption model—The population splits sharply between price-sensitive migrant workers (small packs, immediate consumption) and affluent locals and professionals (premium formats, lifestyle brands). Successful beverage players must run both value and premium strategies simultaneously.

Structural market reality: Pepsi is the default cola in many everyday outlets—Pepsi's UAE strength is reinforced by (1) the outsized influence of South Asian expatriate consumers (especially the Indian community) across everyday retail and value-led dining, and (2) recurring boycott/anti-US brand sentiment that makes some shoppers and operators more open to non-Coca-Cola choices. This shapes what is realistic across baqalas, cafeterias, QSR partnerships, and menu listings, and increases the importance of winning the right channels and moments rather than assuming default distribution.

Economic and Regulatory Considerations

- **Tiered sugar tax from January 2026**—regular Coca-Cola, Fanta, and Sprite fall into the high-sugar tier; Zero Sugar and Diet variants escape excise entirely. Products without a valid UAE Conformity Certificate are automatically classified as high-sugar. 5% VAT applies on top.

- **Nutri-Mark front-of-pack labeling**—Abu Dhabi's Nutri-Mark system, mandatory from 1 June 2025, assigns beverages an A-to-E color-coded nutritional grade. The label must occupy more than 20% of the front of the pack. Products without Nutri-Mark face shelf withdrawal. MoIAT proposed regulations in late 2025 to extend Nutri-Mark nationally.

- **Abu Dhabi outdoor advertising ban**—banned outdoor advertising of products rated C, D, or E under its SEHHI nutritional profiling system, effective end of 2025. Covers billboards, bus shelters, taxis, delivery vehicles, and digital outdoor screens. Brand-only advertising is prohibited. Every ad must showcase an actual product meeting Grade A or B. Only zero-sugar variants can appear on outdoor media in Abu Dhabi.

- **Single-use plastic cup ban**—single-use plastic beverage cups and lids are banned from 1 January 2026. Branded cups must now use PLA plant-based, paper, bagasse, or other approved biodegradable alternatives.

- **EPR pilot launched**—first Extended Producer Responsibility pilot launched July 2025. Twenty-six companies including The Coca-Cola Company signed the EPR Pledge. Coca-Cola–Carrefour–Sparklo reverse vending partnership aims to collect 1.8M containers annually. Full EPR framework planned for 2026.

- **Arabic-first packaging**—All pre-packaged food labels must be in Arabic (or bilingual Arabic/English), with Arabic as the primary language and font size never smaller than English. Required elements include product name, ingredients, allergens, net weight, production/expiry dates, nutritional declaration, country of origin, and storage conditions.

- **Boycott sensitivity—**Alternative cola brands (Matrix Cola, Kinza, Campa Cola) saw up to 200% growth driven by boycott movements. Western beverage brands faced a 7% sales decline in H1 2024 across the Middle East (NielsenIQ). Local cultural authenticity is strategically important.

On-Trade: Bars, Restaurants, Venues

What are the Key Venues and Spaces? What POS Formats Work Here?

Dubai has over 13,000 licensed F&B outlets—a density of 3.6 restaurants per 1,000 residents, far exceeding London (1.5) and New York (2.0). An additional 1,200 new restaurant licenses were issued in 2024 alone. The Michelin Guide Dubai 2025 features 119 establishments across 35+ cuisine types. The UAE food service market totaled $18.78 billion in 2024, with QSR alone at $5.25 billion.

Malls

Malls as summer-dominant consumption spaces. Extreme heat pushes everyday socializing, dining, and impulse beverage consumption indoors. Malls become the default high-footfall "third place" for eating, snacking, family time, and entertainment. In-mall media is highly developed: DOOH corridor and atrium screens, escalator/travelator branding, food court digital menus, pop-up kiosk activations, cinema lobby and parking branding are all established formats.

Ultra-Luxury Hotels and Premium Dining

White-tablecloth restaurants, five-star hotel lobbies, rooftop lounges, Michelin-rated establishments (two newly awarded three-star restaurants: FZN by Björn Frantzén and Trèsind Studio—the first Indian restaurant globally to earn three stars). Coca-Cola Arena (17,000 capacity, City Walk) is a directly owned activation asset.

Cafés and Casual Dining

High-volume, high-turnover venues serving the UAE's extraordinarily diverse culinary scene. Filipino, Indian, Lebanese, Pakistani, and international cuisines. Students, freelancers, social dining. AQUA Water Bar in Dubai Media City is an example of the premium non-alcoholic innovation in this space.

QSR

McDonald's, Burger King, and Hardee's are Coca-Cola partners. KFC, Pizza Hut, and Taco Bell serve PepsiCo through Yum! Brands. Albaik (Saudi-origin, hugely popular) also partners with PepsiCo. Talabat and Careem have made the combo meal the default delivery order.

Shisha Lounges

An undervalued beverage channel. 86% of UAE hospitality businesses expect shisha demand to increase over the next two years (AIR research). Sessions last 1–2+ hours with continuous soft drink consumption. Premium hotel lounges (Buhayra at Palace Downtown), rooftop venues (The Penthouse at FIVE Palm), beachside spots, and franchise concepts (HookahPlace across DIFC and Marina).

Beach Clubs and Pool Venues

Premium outdoor beverage service at AED 30–60+ per soft drink. Cabana packages with AED 1,000–3,000 beverage credits. Tourist-driven, high-visibility, high-margin.

Food Halls and Food Trucks

Time Out Market, Depachika, extensive food truck scene. Casual, social, high footfall. These are social-first, multi-vendor spaces. These are outdoors in the high season and inside warehouses during the summer months. POSM that work well are vendor counter displays, branded cups/napkins/tray liners, digital menu board content, table toppers, sampling station kits, food truck vehicle wraps, and perimeter boardsBanquets and Experiential Events

Ramadan iftar tents at major hotels (Atlantis, Ritz-Carlton, FIVE Hotels, Westin). Corporate galas, weddings, Eid celebrations. Global Village (exclusive Coca-Cola partnership since Season 27/2022). Expo City Dubai—AED 25 billion invested, 75+ events in 2025.

POS Formats On-Trade

Across all venue types, the UAE's on-trade has an established but rapidly evolving POS toolkit. Climate extremes, cultural diversity, and regulatory change create a uniquely demanding production environment.

Zone 1: Street & Traditional (Baqalas, Cafeterias, Food Trucks)

POS formats: Branded coolers/ice wells, small counter-top displays, door decals, price cards, counter-front branding panels, service-window decals, queue-line/menu boards, tray liners, QR code stickers, delivery platform imagery, reusable cup branding (aligned to single-use plastic rules).

HH Global value: Compact, heat-resistant, bilingual (Arabic/English) POS production at scale for 5,000+ baqalas. Standardized vendor kits through bottler logistics. UV-stable materials essential for forecourt and outdoor placement.

Zone 2: QSR, Casual Dining & Modern On-Trade, In Mall Food Courts

POS formats: Digital menu boards, branded trays/liners, counter standees, Freestyle machine wraps, combo meal signage, table talkers, menu inserts (incl. QR-enabled), branded glassware, coaster programs, counter displays, window graphics, bar-back fridge wraps, counter-top sampling risers, digital screen loops, delivery platform imagery.

HH Global value: Template-driven digital signage across 13,000+ F&B outlets. Campaign calendar management (Ramadan → Eid → National Day → DSF). Multilingual asset production (Arabic, English, Hindi, Urdu, Tagalog). Delivery platform asset production at scale.

Zone 3: Premium Hotels, Beach Clubs & Shisha Lounges

POS formats: Bar rail mats, back-bar LED shelving, premium branded glassware, minibar cards, tray liners, menu inserts, branded ice buckets, illuminated table talkers, terrace menu boards, poolside menu holders, branded parasols, cabana menu cards, ice-bucket rituals, and outdoor assets built for heat/UV exposure.

HH Global value: Premium material specifications matching ultra-luxury venue expectations. Heat/UV-resistant outdoor materials for terrace, poolside, and beach. Ramadan-specific iftar tent and suhoor lounge branding suites. Arabic calligraphy and culturally sensitive design execution.

Zone 4: Mega-Events & Experiential—In-Mall Experiential

POS formats: Large-format event banners, pop-up booth wraps, sampling stations, branded hydration points, buffet and beverage-station signage, banquet menu inserts, mobile bar wraps, cooler backdrops, stage/backdrop integration, LED screen content, experiential installations, social media activation frames/selfie zones, wristbands/QR mechanics, staff uniforms/aprons, collectible event cups (biodegradable-only post-2026).

HH Global value: End-to-end event activation production for Coca-Cola Arena (17,000 capacity), Global Village, F1 Abu Dhabi GP, Dubai Fitness Challenge, Expo City Dubai. Modular kit systems. Biodegradable cup compliance post-2026 ban. Phygital experience production (QR-to-experience, AR activations).

Any Cultural Drinking/Dining Occasions That Matter for On-Trade?

Peak Occasions (late October through end of March: Big events; sweet spot for trade shows)

- Ramadan & Eid—the #1 commercial moment. Ramadan drives the biggest concentration of food-and-beverage spend, with iftar and suhoor creating predictable, high-volume consumption windows; modern trade and HoReCa both re-merchandise heavily around it
- Back-to-school—the second key peak, led by value bundles and lunchbox/refreshment missions across supermarkets/hypermarkets and everyday dining formats
- Iftar—breaking fast—set up around the city outdoors
- New Year's Eve
- Tourism peak (Q4–Q1)
- Major concerts
- Sporting events
- UAE National Day (Dec 2)
- F1 Abu Dhabi Grand Prix
- Dubai Jazz Festival
- Untold Dubai Mega Festival
- Global Sporting Events—e.g. FIFA World Cup—Screenings in Sports bars and Fan Zones in hotels and Malls

Always On

- Meal occasions—Extreme dining-out culture. One of the highest restaurant densities per capita globally
- Shisha sessions—1–2+ hour dwell time with continuous beverage consumption
- Resort consumption
- Sports watching—Cricket (UAE hosts IPL and ICC events), football, F1
- Outdoor occasions

Off-Trade & Retail

Retail Landscape—Who are the Dominant Retailers? What Shelf/Display Norms Exist? What is the Convenience Store Landscape?

Industry estimates the size of the UAE grocery retail market at around $40B in 2024, with growth in the mid-single digits. Hypermarkets remain the leading modern trade format, alongside supermarkets, while e-grocery/quick commerce and forecourt convenience continue to gain share. Price/value is consistently cited as a key driver of grocery store choice.

RETAILER	SCALE (INDICATIVE)	KEY FACTS
Carrefour (Majid Al Futtaim)	National leader	Large footprint across formats (hypermarket/supermarket). Strong omnichannel presence (Carrefour app and delivery partnerships). Use reliable syndicated data before quoting precise market shares.
Lulu Hypermarket	Top-tier	Major hypermarket player with broad geographic coverage; strong fresh proposition and value-led promotions.
Nesto	Large	Value positioning; strong relevance with South Asian expat communities; regional reach across emirates.
Spinneys (incl. Waitrose, Al Fair)	Premium	Premium supermarket chain; listed on Dubai Financial Market in 2024 (IPO heavily oversubscribed).
Union Cooperative Society	Regional leader	Dubai-based cooperative retailer; strong relevance with Emirati households; Arabic-first communication is important.
Sharjah Cooperative Society	Regional	Cooperative presence in Sharjah and Northern Emirates; strong neighborhood coverage.
Viva (discounter)	Fast-growing	UAE’s best-known grocery discounter; private label-led model; rapid store rollout.

Baqalas—Traditional Small Grocers

A critical segment: Baqalas (traditional small grocers under 50 sqm) are reported to account for ~81% of UAE grocery retail outlets (trade reporting). These neighborhood stores remain a major last-mile impulse channel for chilled beverages, and require tailored, compact, bilingual POS solutions.

Shelf and Display Norms

- Counter-facing layouts
- Products stored behind shopkeeper
- Vertical stacking is common; half depth minimal
- Products on floor, counter or wall-mounted racks
- Branded glass-door coolers
- Cooler decals
- Exterior shutters/fascia
- Window/door stickers
- Wobblers/danglers

Key Challenges

- No standardized shelving or planograms—every baqala is different, making deployment at scale complex.
- Extreme climate degrades outdoor POS rapidly. Standard PVC warps and cracks; paper/card deteriorates. UV-stabilized, heat-resistant materials are essential.
- Multilingual requirements—Arabic primary, with English secondary. Hindi/Urdu may be relevant depending on neighborhood demographics.
- Intense competition from alternative colas (Matrix, Kinza, Campa) and local brands gaining share through boycott sentiment and value pricing.

Modern Trade (Hypermarkets & Supermarkets)

Hypermarkets account for 46% of UAE retail food value, with supermarkets at 25%. The channel is led by Carrefour (Majid Al Futtaim) and Lulu Hypermarket, which between them command over 50% of hypermarket share. Spinneys occupies the premium supermarket tier. Cooperatives (Union Coop, Sharjah Coop) serve predominantly Emirati shoppers. Viva is the fastest-growing discounter, with 93 outlets.

Modern trade is structurally different from baqalas: centralized procurement, strict planogram compliance, trade-term negotiations for promotional real estate, and increasingly sophisticated retail media networks. The environment is universally air-conditioned, allowing standard material specifications indoors.

Shelf and Display Norms

- Standardized gondola shelving—beverage allocation reflecting UAE's drinking hierarchy: water (dominant), RTD tea, isotonics, CSDs, energy drinks.
- Chiller units along back or side walls—maximum footfall routing before checkout. Cold visibility is the #1 driver of impulse purchase in the UAE's heat-driven market.
- End-cap displays—premium promotional real estate, allocated through trade-term negotiation.
- Ramadan promotional bays—the single largest promotional period. Massive floor islands and gondola wraps. Discounts reach 50–75%.
- Bilingual shelf labeling—Arabic first, with English secondary.
- Checkout/impulse zones—ingle-serve packs and promo bundles at checkout lanes.
- Pallet displays—common for bulk buying at Carrefour and Lulu hypermarkets.
- Loyalty and promotional pricing—requent cycles tracked through loyalty apps. Consumers are deal-driven.
- Category adjacencies are commercially significant: mixers near spirits, water near snacks/RTD, refrigeration grouped by need-state.
- Shelf talkers, wobblers, and hanging banners form the core POSM toolkit. All must be bilingual Arabic/English, with Arabic as the primary language.
- Shelf-edge labels with promotional pricing. Dual-format pricing (standard + loyalty member) is emerging as retailer loyalty programs grow.
- Clip strips and side-kicks extend shelf space on gondolas for small packs and limited-time offers.
- Floor graphics
- Digital/Retail Media

Convenience & Forecourt Landscape

Convenience stores account for 6% of retail food value (~$1.14B). The petrol station forecourt is critically important in the UAE's car-dependent culture, especially given extreme heat driving impulse purchases of chilled beverages. The two major players are ADNOC Oasis and ZOOM (ENOC).

Shelf and Display Norms

- Chilled grab-and-go is the dominant beverage display mechanic. Beverages are the #1 impulse buy in forecourt retail.
- Counter and queue-zone real estate is the highest-value display space. Branded floor decals and shelf barkers line the path from fridge to counter.
- Branded cooler door decals are the single most visible brand asset in the channel (mirroring baqalas).
- Forecourt A-frames and pump toppers provide outdoor brand signage at the fuel pump—the first touchpoint before the shopper enters. Must be heat-resistant.
- Meal deal combo boards (overhead or counter-mounted) pair food items with named cold drinks.

ADNOC Premiumization

- ADNOC has introduced "The Hub"—an upmarket service station roadside retail experience with QSR and experience-driven space.
- ADNOC is premiumizing with "On-the-Gourmet" concepts (barista coffee, matcha, protein shakes) and piloting autonomous AI-powered cashless stores. ADNOC targets 50% growth in non-fuel transactions by 2028.
- ADNOC partnered with Noon (April 2025) to retrofit 50 fuel stations into micro-fulfillment hubs for 15-minute delivery—blurring convenience and quick commerce.
- ADNOC has interactive LED screens and has introduced a retail media network.

What Does At-Home vs. Away-From-Home Consumption Look Like?

Off-trade consumption is dominantly impulse and on-the-spot. Big shops and stock-ups are less likely. Soda is a celebration and a treat drink, not a pantry staple.

At-Home Consumption

- Ramadan iftar at home—family gatherings, communal serving of large-format bottles alongside jallab, qamar al-din, Vimto.

- Delivery meals—beverage add-on standard in combo deals. Talabat, Careem, Noon.
- Sports watching—cricket, football, F1.
- Weekend entertaining—BBQs, dinner parties.
- DIY mixing—“dirty sodas” trend (customized mixed soft drinks) gaining traction via social media.

Away-From-Home Consumption

- Heat-driven impulse—thirst-quenching single-serve cooler grab at kirana or dhaba
- Commute
- Work lunch
- Mall shopping
- Travel occasions—highway dhabas, railway stations, airports

Merchandise & Collectibles

Are There Any Viral Culturally Relevant Products?

Tourism Souvenir Collectibles

Sand-art bottles using Coca-Cola bottles are already a popular Dubai souvenir. A UAE-specific collectible bottle featuring iconic landmarks (Burj Khalifa, Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, Museum of the Future) would target duty-free, tourist retail, and hotel gift shops.

Ramadan Gifting and Serving Sets

Gifting and table presentation peak during Ramadan. Beverage brands frequently issue Ramadan-specific SKUs successfully (Nielsen MENA Ramadan Shopper Report 2024). Ramadan serving sets, decorative packaging, and iftar table accessories are culturally embedded gifting occasions.

Karak Chai and Traditional Beverages

Karak chai toast has become a TikTok ASMR phenomenon. Arabic coffee, jallab, and qamar al-din are culturally embedded beverages with visual identities that could inspire limited-edition design language or serving-format merch.

Arabic Artist Fandoms

Arabic pop and rap fandoms drive viral momentum across TikTok and YouTube, mobilizing memes, edits, and merch drops around artists like regional superstars, turning releases into cultural moments that brands can tap through limited editions.