

## THE INDIA- UAE CORRIDOR: FROM ACCESS TO ADVANTAGE

Opportunities for  
growth in the consumer  
& retail sectors



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# FOREWORD

## FUTURE-READY RETAIL

India and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) exhibit one of the most dynamic and forward-looking partnerships globally. Rooted in deep historical ties, robust economic cooperation, and strong people-to-people connections, the relationship has strengthened bilateral trade and enabled sustained collaboration across key strategic sectors. The consumer and retail sector, in particular, presents strong synergistic opportunities under the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA).

India remains one of the world's most compelling growth markets, driven by a burgeoning consumer base, strong demographic momentum, rising disposable incomes, and a US \$4 trillion economy. Meanwhile, the UAE stands as a leading consumer and retail hub in the Middle East. At the same time, rapid digital technology is transforming consumer reach and engagement. These shifts, supported by enabling regulatory and policy frameworks, are accelerating market integration, enhancing competitiveness, and driving coordinated investments across the India-UAE corridor.

Recognizing the sector's importance in bilateral economic engagement, the UAE-India Business Council-UAE Chapter (UIBC-UC), in partnership with Arthur D. Little (ADL), has developed this report to provide an overview of the trends, competitive landscapes, and cross-border expansion opportunities shaping both markets. Beyond theoretical discussion, the report draws on interviews with businesses across India and the UAE to offer valuable insights and strategic recommendations for businesses seeking to participate in these markets.

As both countries advance their shared vision of economic prosperity, innovation, and global competitiveness, this report aims to strengthen the partnership and catalyze action toward a resilient, future-ready consumer and retail ecosystem.

**Faizal Kottikollon**

Chairman, UIBC-UC

**REWRITING THE RULEBOOK**

The India-UAE corridor is often described as dynamic and strategic. That is accurate — but insufficient. What we are witnessing is not merely a strengthening bilateral relationship; it is the formation of one of the most consequential consumer growth axes of the next decade.

CEPA has shifted the equation. Tariff reductions and regulatory facilitation were starting points. Now, the opportunity lies in operational integration. That means shared supply chains, co-created brands, cross-border capital flows, embedded partnerships, and retail platforms that treat India and the UAE not as export destinations, but as interlinked engines of value creation.

Consumer and retail sit at the center of this transformation. India represents scale. The UAE represents precision. One market delivers volume and sourcing depth. The other delivers margin, brand theater, and global connectivity.

But this complementarity is not a given. The rules of competition in both markets are being rewritten. In India, digital commerce and omnichannel integration are compressing time-to-scale, while in the UAE, brand equity, service excellence, and experiential retail define success.

In this environment, the traditional export-led mindset is structurally inadequate. Companies that treat market entry as a distribution exercise will struggle. Those that treat it as a capability build will outperform — and the difference between presence and scale will come down to discipline in execution.

This is why ADL is proud to partner with the UIBC-UC on this report. The objective is not to restate macro-optimism, but to provide decision-grade clarity. The opportunity is significant, but it will favor those who act decisively, build locally, and think bi-directionally.

**Thomas Kuruvilla**

Managing Partner, Middle East & India,  
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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**The India-UAE consumer corridor is entering a new phase of development, moving beyond traditional trade flows toward a more integrated and operationally interconnected ecosystem. To better understand this shift, UIBC-UC and ADL conducted interviews with multinational retailers, regional retail groups, and category leaders in both markets, capturing first-hand insights, success stories, and lessons learned.**

From the outset, while macroeconomic indicators point to strong growth in both countries, senior executives consistently emphasized that the real opportunity lies not in headline figures, but in how companies navigate the structural differences between the two markets.

At a fundamental level, India and the UAE offer complementary value propositions. India provides scale, diversity, and long-term growth potential, supported by a rapidly expanding middle class and increasing digital adoption. The UAE, in contrast, offers a premium, globally benchmarked retail environment characterized by high purchasing power, advanced infrastructure, and a diverse, internationally influenced consumer base. However, this complementarity does not automatically translate into success.

A recurring theme across interviews is that companies often underestimate the level of adaptation required to operate effectively across the corridor. Those that rely on standardized, export-led approaches struggle to scale, while those that invest in building local capabilities are better positioned to succeed.

Three execution priorities consistently emerge:

- 1. Localization is critical.** This extends well beyond product adaptation to encompass pricing, distribution, brand positioning, and decision-making processes.
- 2. Partnerships play a central role.** While export-led entry can provide an initial foothold, sustained growth typically requires deeper collaboration through joint ventures, franchise models, or strategic alliances that provide local market access and operational expertise.
- 3. Supply chains are being reconfigured.** Companies are moving away from centralized production toward more regionalized and hybrid models that balance cost efficiency with responsiveness and regulatory requirements.

Despite progress under CEPA, regulatory friction also remains a constraint, particularly in areas such as certification, compliance, and approval timelines. Taken together, these insights highlight a clear shift: the next phase of growth in the India-UAE consumer corridor will be defined not by market potential alone, but by execution capability. Companies that invest in localization, partnerships, and supply chain alignment — supported by an enabling policy environment — will be best positioned to capture this opportunity.

# 1. MARKET SNAPSHOTS

**To understand the opportunities and challenges shaping the India-UAE consumer corridor, it is first important to understand the dynamics at play in both markets, from demographics to digital transformation.**

## INDIA

India represents one of the most compelling consumer growth markets globally, combining scale, structural tailwinds, and rapid transformation. With a population exceeding 1.4 billion and a nominal GDP of approximately \$3.9 trillion,<sup>1</sup> the country is on track to become the world's third-largest economy by 2030.<sup>2</sup> This macroeconomic momentum is translating directly into consumption growth, positioning India as a priority market for both domestic and international consumer companies.

The retail sector is already approaching \$1 trillion in size and is expected to exceed \$1.5 trillion by dawn of the next decade.<sup>3</sup> This expansion is underpinned by rising disposable incomes, accelerating urbanization, and a gradual shift from unorganized to organized retail. Importantly, consumption is no longer concentrated in major metropolitan areas. Growth is increasingly broad-based, with Tier 2 cities such as Pune and Jaipur, Tier 3 cities like Agra and Kota, and rural markets emerging as significant demand drivers.

Rural fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) growth has in fact outpaced urban markets in recent quarters, reflecting rising incomes, improved distribution, and deeper category penetration. This shift is narrowing the traditional rural-urban consumption gap and expanding the addressable market for consumer companies.

A key structural shift is the expansion of the middle class, which is projected to reach over 715 million people within five years.<sup>4</sup> This is reshaping consumption patterns, with a clear move toward discretionary spending. Non-food categories now account for more than 50% of household consumption, reflecting rising demand for lifestyle, fashion, personal care, and premium food products.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, value sensitivity remains a defining feature of the market, requiring companies to balance affordability with aspiration.

Digital transformation is a critical enabler of this growth. With over 880 million internet users and rapidly increasing rural penetration, India is experiencing a fundamental shift in how consumers discover, evaluate, and purchase products. The widespread adoption of digital payments — particularly UPI — has accelerated e-commerce and enabled the rise of omnichannel and direct-to-consumer models.<sup>6</sup> Quick commerce is further redefining consumer expectations, expanding beyond groceries into categories such as beauty, electronics, and daily essentials.

From a category perspective, several sectors illustrate the depth of opportunity. The fashion and apparel market is valued at approximately \$184 billion, driven by a combination of domestic consumption and a strong manufacturing base.<sup>7</sup> The food and beverage sector is also expanding rapidly, supported by urbanization, changing lifestyles, and increasing demand for convenience-led formats such as packaged and ready-to-eat foods. For their part, health, wellness, and premiumization trends are gaining traction across both categories.

1 "India Data." World Bank Group, 2024.

2 "India to Emerge as Third Largest Consumer Market by 2026." *The Economic Times*, 2024.

3 "Retail Industry in India." India Brand Equity Foundation (IBEF), 2024.

4 Rajora, Shiva. "Middle Class Will Nearly Double by 2046-47: PRICE Report." *EEPC India News*, 2023.

5 "Results of Household Consumption Expenditure Survey: 2022-23." Press release, Government of India, 24 February 2024.

6 "Internet in India Report, 2024." Kantar/IAMAI, 2024; and "India to Cross 900 Million Internet Users." *The Economic Times*, 2024.

7 DGCI&S; and "India Apparel Market Estimates," Wazir Advisors, 2024.

*“Over the next three to five years, we believe the wellness and natural products market will accelerate as consumers become increasingly label-conscious and proactive about preventive health.”*

**Pranav Malhotra,  
Founder & CEO, TruNativ**

Despite its scale, India remains a highly complex market. It is not a single, unified consumer landscape but a collection of distinct micro-markets differentiated by income, geography, culture, and channel dynamics. As a result, success requires granular segmentation, localized offerings, and a multi-channel strategy. Companies that treat India as a homogeneous market risk underperformance; those that invest in localization and execution discipline are better positioned to capture its full potential.

*“India offers a growing but complex environment for launching and scaling retail ventures.”*

**Kabir Lumba,  
Group CEO, Landmark Group**

## UAE

The UAE represents a highly developed, premium consumer market that plays a dual role as both a domestic consumption hub and a regional gateway. With a GDP of approximately \$544 billion and GDP per capita of around \$49,000, the UAE is among the most affluent markets globally.<sup>8</sup> Its consumer landscape is characterized by high purchasing power, a diverse expatriate population, and strong exposure to global brands and trends.

The retail sector, valued at approximately \$83-\$84 billion, is a cornerstone of the economy and continues to evolve in sophistication and scale.<sup>9</sup> Unlike larger markets driven by volume, the UAE is defined by value density — high spend per consumer, strong premiumization, and a focus on experience-led retail. The market benefits from a highly supportive regulatory environment, including full foreign ownership in many sectors, which has encouraged significant international investment.

*“The UAE maintains a reputation for being highly business-friendly.... Regulatory processes are increasingly digital, reducing red tape and enabling rapid market entry.”*

**Kabir Lumba,  
Group CEO, Landmark Group**

A defining feature of the UAE retail ecosystem is its mall-centric structure. Large-format destinations such as The Dubai Mall function not only as shopping venues but as integrated lifestyle and entertainment hubs. With over 100 million visitors annually,<sup>10</sup> such destinations highlight the importance of experiential retail in driving footfall and consumer engagement. Retail in the UAE is therefore not purely transactional — it is deeply embedded in leisure, tourism, and social activity.

Tourism is a major demand driver, contributing significantly to retail sales across categories. The UAE’s position as a global travel hub brings a constant influx of international consumers, particularly into segments such as luxury goods, fashion, electronics, and jewelry. This dynamic creates both opportunity and complexity, as retailers must continuously adapt to a globally diverse customer base with varying preferences and purchasing behaviors.

*“The UAE is a market that is hungry for newness, yet seeks value.”*

**Kabir Lumba,  
Group CEO, Landmark Group**

Digital adoption is high and continues to accelerate. The e-commerce market is projected to reach over \$13 billion by 2028, supported by strong logistics infrastructure and high consumer expectations around convenience and service.<sup>11</sup> Omnichannel integration is now a baseline requirement, with consumers expecting seamless transitions between online and offline touchpoints. Quick commerce and last-mile delivery are also gaining traction, particularly in urban centers.

In terms of product categories, premium and luxury segments dominate, particularly in beauty, personal care, and fashion. The gems and jewelry sector is especially prominent, with the UAE serving as both a major consumption market and a global trading hub.

<sup>8</sup> “United Arab Emirates Data,” World Bank Group, 2024.

<sup>9</sup> “UAE Retail Market Size and Forecast to 2027,” GlobalData, 2024.

<sup>10</sup> “Emaar Announces AED 1.5 Billion Expansion of Dubai Mall,” Emaar Properties, 4 June 2024.

<sup>11</sup> “UAE E-Commerce Outlook,” Stratrich, 2024.

Gold jewelry continues to account for a significant share of demand, while diamond jewelry is the fastest-growing segment, driven by premiumization and gifting trends.

However, the market is not uniformly premium. A large expatriate population sustains demand for value-oriented retail formats, including hypermarkets and private label offerings. This creates a dual-market dynamic, where companies must simultaneously address high-end and value-conscious segments.

Overall, the UAE is a performance-driven market where success is defined by brand strength, operational excellence, and customer experience. While smaller in scale than India, it offers high margins, global visibility, and a strategic platform for regional expansion. Companies that can deliver premium positioning while navigating a diverse consumer base are best positioned to succeed.

## SUPPORTIVE POLICY ARCHITECTURE

Beyond strong market fundamentals, the India-UAE consumer corridor is reinforced by a progressively enabling policy environment that supports trade, investment, and operational integration. At the center is CEPA, which has significantly lowered barriers to trade. The agreement eliminates or reduces duties across most tariff lines, providing preferential access for key consumer sectors including apparel, food, personal care, and jewelry.<sup>12</sup> This has improved price competitiveness and expanded market access for businesses in both countries.

CEPA also goes beyond tariffs. It introduces more efficient customs procedures, simplified rules of origin, and greater regulatory coordination, reducing friction in cross-border operations.

These measures are complemented by broader structural reforms. Both countries have liberalized foreign investment regimes, enabled full ownership in many sectors, and streamlined business setup processes. At the same time, investments in logistics and infrastructure, including India's Gati Shakti initiative and the UAE's advanced free zone ecosystem, are strengthening supply chain connectivity and operational efficiency.

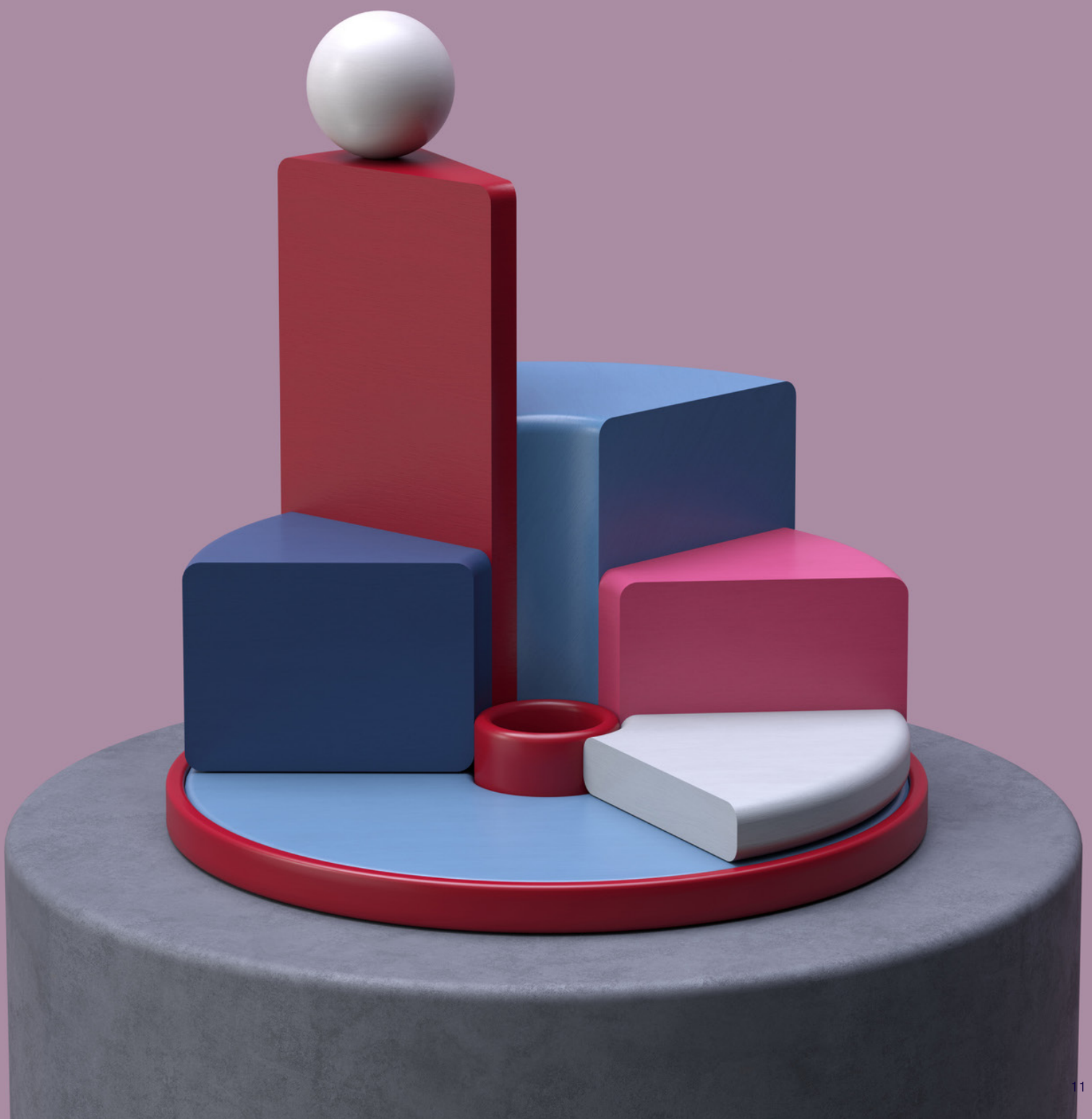
As a result, bilateral trade is accelerating, particularly in non-oil sectors, with both governments targeting \$100 billion in non-oil trade by 2030, up from \$57.8 billion in 2024.<sup>13</sup> Emerging initiatives such as local currency settlement mechanisms and potential integration of digital payment systems are expected to further reduce transaction costs and facilitate cross-border commerce.

These developments pave the way for a more integrated economic corridor that allows companies not only to access markets more easily, but to build, operate, and scale across both geographies with greater efficiency.

## THE INDIA-UAE CONSUMER CORRIDOR IS REINFORCED BY A PROGRESSIVELY ENABLING POLICY ENVIRONMENT

<sup>12</sup> "India Data." World Bank Group, 2024 (CEPA-related trade data).

<sup>13</sup> "India-UAE Set \$100 bn Non-Oil Trade Target by 2030." Mint, 2024.



## 2. INDUSTRY VOICES: 5 STRATEGIC REALITIES

Set against these two distinct national backdrops, this Viewpoint draws on interviews with senior executives from leading consumer and retail companies from both countries. From the UAE, these include diversified conglomerate, Sharaf Group, and retail giants Landmark Group, Apparel Group, and LuLu Group. From India, participating companies include Tata Consumer Products (note: Tata Sons is a board member of UIBC-UC; multinational food products company, Britannia Industries; FMCG multinational, Marico; Mumbai-based online nutrition brand, TruNativ, and Tanishq — the jewelry business of Titan Company, which is part of Tata Group.

Each business has carved its own path, but the interview findings reveal a consistent message: success across the India-UAE corridor is not defined by market attractiveness alone, but by how effectively companies navigate structural complexity, align their operating models, and execute with precision.

These perspectives point to five strategic realities that shape outcomes across the corridor:

**A CENTRAL THEME IS THE NEED TO MOVE BEYOND VIEWING INDIA AS A SINGLE, UNIFIED OPPORTUNITY**

### 1. INDIA IS NOT ONE MARKET

A central theme across interviews is the need to move beyond viewing India as a single, unified opportunity. Instead, companies must approach it as a collection of distinct micro-markets, each with its own demand drivers, price sensitivities, and consumption patterns.

*“India is not one market — it is many Indias. Success comes from micro-market thinking, not national strategies.”*

**Aditya Singh,  
Head, International Business (Jewelry),  
Titan Company Limited**

This fragmentation spans income levels, cultural preferences, languages, and retail maturity. As a result, strategies designed at a national level often fail to translate into consistent performance on the ground. Leading companies instead prioritize granular segmentation and adopt cluster-based approaches, focusing on specific regions or city clusters before scaling further.

Importantly, India's next wave of growth is increasingly driven by Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities, where demand dynamics differ significantly from metro markets. Capturing this opportunity requires tailored product formats, pricing architectures, and distribution models.

*“Our 25 years in India have taught us that targeting meaningful population clusters around major cities often delivers better returns than pursuing nationwide coverage. Winning in India demands deep local insight, agility, and a sharp commercial mindset.”*

**Kabir Lumba,**  
Group CEO, Landmark Group

## 2. THE UAE IS A PREMIUM GLOBAL RETAIL LAB

In contrast, the UAE is consistently described as a highly structured, performance-driven market that functions as both a domestic opportunity and a global showcase for brands.

Consumers are internationally exposed and expect high standards across quality, service, and experience. Retail is deeply integrated into lifestyle ecosystems, with malls serving as hubs for shopping, entertainment, and leisure. As a result, execution standards are elevated, and brand perception plays a critical role in driving demand.

*“In the UAE, consumers have shown preference for premium offerings within packaged food and beverage categories, reflecting their exposure to leading global FMCG brands.”*

**Tata Consumer Products**

The UAE’s position as a tourism hub further reinforces this dynamic, creating a diverse and constantly evolving consumer base. At the same time, the retail landscape is relatively concentrated, with strong mall operators and established retail groups shaping market access.

Success in the UAE therefore requires not only a compelling value proposition, but also consistency, experiential excellence, and alignment with global benchmarks.

*“The UAE’s retail market will remain buoyant and, as such, growth will continue due to the various positive initiatives and projects being launched constantly.”*

**H.E. Major General (Retd.) Sharafuddin Sharaf,**  
Vice-Chairman of Sharaf Group,  
Vice Chairman of UIBC-UC

## 3. PARTNERSHIPS ARE CRITICAL FOR CROSS-BORDER EXPANSION

Across both markets, partnerships emerge as a critical enabler of success — not just for market entry, but for long-term scaling.

In India, local partners provide essential capabilities in navigating regulatory complexity, fragmented distribution networks, and regional diversity. In the UAE, partnerships often facilitate access to prime retail locations, established infrastructure, and operational platforms within a concentrated ecosystem.

*“We maintain long-standing relationships with channel partners whose local market expertise helps us strengthen our business presence in the region.”*

**Tata Consumer Products**

However, the effectiveness of partnerships depends on depth and alignment. Companies that approach partnerships as transactional arrangements often face limitations, while those that build strategic, long-term collaborations—through joint ventures, franchise models, or alliances — are better positioned to scale sustainably.

## 4. LOCALIZATION DRIVES SUCCESS

Localization is consistently identified as a defining factor in determining whether companies can move beyond entry to sustained growth. In India, localization is closely linked to affordability, trust, and cultural relevance. Companies must adapt product formats, pricing, and communication to align with diverse consumer segments. Premium positioning is viable, but only when supported by clear value differentiation.

In the UAE, localization takes a different form, reflecting the needs of a highly international population. Companies must balance global brand consistency with the ability to resonate across diverse expatriate and tourist segments.

Across both markets, localization is not a discrete initiative, but an ongoing capability embedded within the operating model. Companies that treat it as such are better positioned to remain relevant as market conditions evolve.

## 5. SUPPLY CHAINS MUST BE REGIONAL

Executives highlight a shift in the role of supply chains from operational backbone to strategic differentiator. Rising logistics costs, increasing expectations around speed and availability, and evolving regulatory requirements are driving companies to rethink traditional, centralized models. In response, many are adopting regionalized or hybrid supply chain structures that combine global sourcing with local or regional production and distribution.

This shift is particularly evident across the India-UAE corridor. India serves as both a high-growth consumer market and a sourcing base, while the UAE functions as a regional hub with advanced logistics infrastructure.

*“Global supply chain volatility and geopolitical shifts will remain an essential part of global dynamics. As such, it’s natural that producers align themselves to such developments rather quickly, given today’s technology and processes, which enable quick adjustments.”*

**H.E. Major General (Retd.) Sharafuddin Sharaf,  
Vice-Chairman of Sharaf Group,  
Vice Chairman of UIBC-UC**

As companies increasingly integrate operations across the corridor, supply chains are evolving into interconnected systems that enable value to flow in multiple directions — enhancing flexibility, responsiveness, and resilience.

*“There is a need to further develop local sourcing capabilities for high-quality raw materials, which will improve cost efficiencies and accelerate time-to-market to meet local consumer demand effectively.”*

**Tata Consumer Products**

## 3. NAVIGATING CHALLENGES ACROSS THE VALUE CHAIN

While the strategic realities outlined above define the contours of opportunity across the India–UAE corridor, they also give rise to a distinct set of execution challenges. Companies that fail to translate these insights into action often encounter friction across the value chain — from misaligned consumer targeting to inefficiencies in supply chain design and operating models.

In practice, these realities manifest in specific ways. India’s market fragmentation complicates segmentation and channel strategy, while the UAE’s premium, globally benchmarked environment raises the bar for brand positioning and customer experience. At the same time, the central role of partnerships introduces both opportunity and complexity in governance and execution, and the need for continuous localization challenges organizations to adapt at speed and scale. For their part, supply chains — once treated as operational backbones — have become critical determinants of responsiveness, cost efficiency, and resilience.

As a result, success depends not only on identifying “where to play,” but on building the capabilities required to “win” across each layer of execution. This includes defining the right consumer segments, aligning brand positioning, designing effective channel strategies, and establishing operating models that reflect local realities.

### WHERE TO PLAY

Identifying the right consumer segments is the foundation of a successful go-to-market strategy. However, companies in both India and the UAE often fail to take a sufficiently holistic view of their target markets. This leads to mismatches between product offerings

and consumer needs, or a narrow focus that limits scale.

To define “where to play” effectively, companies must segment the market carefully, identify priority consumer groups, and deeply understand their preferences. A “lift-and-shift” approach to branding and product positioning rarely succeeds without adaptation to local consumer sentiment.

### Consumer behavior

Consumer behavior varies significantly across both markets, often differing from a company’s core strengths in its home market.

In India, behavior is highly heterogeneous. Urban consumers increasingly seek premium and convenience-led offerings, while Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities remain strongly value-driven. Consumers are highly price-aware, often evaluating multiple product options, pack sizes, and pricing tiers before making decisions. Promotional strategies play a critical role, particularly outside major cities.

*“Indian consumers are price-aware, not price-averse; trust and transparency are what allow them to trade up.”*

**Aditya Singh,**  
**Head, International Business (Jewelry),**  
**Titan Company Limited**

Service expectations are also rising rapidly. Consumers expect seamless experiences across the entire journey — from discovery to post-purchase support. Quick commerce is expanding beyond groceries into categories such as beauty, electronics, and accessories, reflecting a growing preference for speed and convenience.

At the same time, there is a clear aspiration toward premiumization. Innovative approaches — such as smaller pack sizes — enable companies to introduce premium products to value-conscious consumers and build long-term loyalty. However, broad-based national strategies are often ineffective; targeted approaches are essential.

*“In India, the expanding middle class, rapid urbanization, and increased demand for packaged and branded foods are driving significant growth in aspirational, premium brands.”*

#### Tata Consumer Products

In the UAE, consumer preferences are shaped by a premium, globally exposed population. Consumers favor curated, high-quality offerings and are generally less price-sensitive in premium segments. However, value-conscious expatriate segments remain important, particularly in hypermarkets and discount formats. Service expectations are exceptionally high, with demand for rapid delivery, personalized service, and multilingual engagement. The market is also influenced by tourism, requiring brands to cater to a constantly evolving global audience.

A common challenge is misalignment of offerings. Indian companies often target only the South Asian diaspora in the UAE, limiting their reach, while UAE brands entering India may underestimate regional diversity and price sensitivity.

*“The most important cultural learning for us in the UAE was understanding that even though we were targeting Indian diaspora, this market is not ‘India abroad’ — it is a multicultural, aspirational society where identity is both local and global.”*

**Aditya Singh,  
Head, International Business (Jewelry),  
Titan Company Limited**

#### Examples:

- An Indian FMCG company significantly expanded its Middle East market share by reformulating products to suit local preferences, including texture, fragrance, and water compatibility.
- A UAE retailer successfully expanded in India by adapting its product mix and incorporating local preferences into its retail formats.

**Lesson:** Deep localization across product mix, formulation, language, and brand tone is essential. Cultural nuance matters, even in familiar-looking markets.

#### Branding & market positioning

Brand positioning must be carefully adapted to local market dynamics. In India, consumers are value-conscious but not purely price-driven. They are willing to pay a premium for products that deliver clear value. This has enabled the rise of direct-to-consumer brands that challenge established players through differentiated offerings.

Marketing is increasingly digital, with strong growth in social media and influencer engagement. However, traditional channels such as television and outdoor media remain important for building brand equity. At the same time, regional languages and culturally relevant messaging are essential for connecting with diverse audiences, while seasonal events, such as festivals and cricket play a major role in driving demand.

In the UAE, consumers are highly brand conscious and aspirational. Purchasing decisions are often driven by brand reputation, design, and experiential value. Premium positioning is critical, and consumers expect global standards of quality and innovation.

Marketing strategies are centered around mall activations, loyalty programs, and digital engagement. Influencer marketing — particularly in lifestyle and fashion — plays a significant role in shaping consumer perception, while key shopping periods such as Ramadan and the Dubai Shopping Festival drive peak activity.

*“Our marketing rests on three pillars: education-led storytelling, digital-first campaigns, and strategic collaborations with like-minded brands.”*

**Pranav Malhotra,**  
**Founder & CEO, TruNativ**

Across the India–UAE corridor, companies often struggle to adapt positioning. Indian brands may find it difficult to transition from value-focused positioning to premium, while UAE brands entering India may lack strong brand narratives or awareness.

#### **Examples:**

- An Indian luxury wellness brand has successfully positioned itself in the UAE by aligning with consumer preferences for sustainability and premium experiences.
- A UAE value fashion brand has built strong traction in India by combining affordability with localized fashion trends and omnichannel presence.

**Lesson:** Success depends on clear positioning and sustained investment in localized storytelling and brand building.

#### **Channel strategy**

Channel dynamics differ significantly between the two markets. In India, traditional retail continues to dominate, but organized retail and e-commerce are growing rapidly. Digital platforms are becoming key demand drivers, particularly in categories such as fashion and lifestyle. Quick commerce is expanding into new categories, while initiatives such as Open Network for Digital Commerce (ONDC) are expected to accelerate digital adoption further.

In this context, an effective channel strategy requires a hybrid approach — leveraging general trade for reach while integrating modern trade and digital channels for growth.

*“Being a truly omnichannel retailer is key to success as we see our online business making over 20% of our GCC retail business, and exponential growth in our ecommerce business in India.”*

**Kabir Lumba,**  
**Group CEO, Landmark Group**

In the UAE, physical retail — particularly malls — remains central, supported by a rapidly evolving e-commerce ecosystem. Consumers expect seamless omnichannel experiences, combining in-store engagement with digital convenience. Across the Emirates, leading marketplaces are expanding rapidly, while experiential formats such as pop-ups and brand activations are becoming important tools for customer engagement.

#### **Examples:**

- Indian beauty retailer Nykaa successfully expanded into the UAE by adapting its omnichannel model to include experiential stores and localized assortments.
- Popular hypermarket chain in the UAE, Carrefour, is re-entering India through a franchise model, leveraging local partners to manage complexity and reduce risk.

**Lesson:** A hybrid approach is essential to (1) appeal to long-standing preferences and (2) keep up with the pace of change as consumers shift towards digital and experiential formats.

## **HOW TO WIN**

While identifying the right market segments is critical, success ultimately depends on execution. Companies must establish operating models, supply chains, and compliance frameworks that align with local realities.

India’s scale and diversity create challenges in designing sourcing, manufacturing, and distribution systems. In contrast, the UAE presents a high-cost, competitive environment with strong regulatory requirements and reliance on imports.

#### **Operating model**

Establishing an effective operating model is a major challenge in both markets. In India, regulatory complexity and market fragmentation make partnerships essential. In particular, joint ventures and franchise models help companies navigate foreign investment restrictions and leverage local expertise. As for the UAE, the business environment is more streamlined, allowing for greater flexibility in

operating models. However, the smaller market size and intense competition require careful positioning and execution.

**Examples:**

- UAE retail giant, Apparel Group, has successfully expanded in India through partnerships, combining centralized brand management with localized operations.
- Indian FMCG company, Britannia Industries, has established a hybrid model in the UAE, combining local manufacturing with outsourced logistics to improve efficiency.

**Lesson:** As with channel strategy, a hybrid approach is vital to operational success, combining a mix of centralized components, outsourcing, and local manufacturing or operations.

**Logistics & warehousing**

Logistics and warehousing are critical enablers of market success but present distinct challenges in each geography. In India, logistics is fragmented and heavily reliant on road transport. While infrastructure is improving, last-mile delivery remains complex due to urban constraints and regional variations. Warehousing quality also varies widely, with increasing demand for modern facilities, driven by e-commerce growth. At the same time, cold chain infrastructure remains underdeveloped, requiring companies to design hybrid solutions that combine centralized and local storage.

In the UAE, logistics infrastructure is highly advanced but cost intensive. Companies must operate with precision, as the market favors just-in-time inventory models. Meanwhile, high compliance standards, particularly for food and pharmaceuticals, add complexity, and distribution is concentrated among a few large players, making partnerships essential for market access.

**Examples:**

- Britannia Industries adopted a hybrid supply chain model combining regional manufacturing with centralized exports.
- A UAE retailer invested in local logistics and processing infrastructure in India to improve efficiency and control.

**Lesson:** Supply chain strategies must be tailored to local realities, balancing cost, responsiveness, and compliance.

**Sourcing & manufacturing**

India is emerging as a major global sourcing hub across multiple categories, supported by strong manufacturing capabilities and competitive costs. As a result, companies are increasingly leveraging India for both domestic and export-oriented production. In contrast, the UAE has limited manufacturing capacity and relies heavily on imports. However, it plays a key role as a re-export hub, supported by world-class logistics infrastructure and free zones.

*“Invest early in supply chain reliability: Consistency in quality and availability is critical to trust.”*

**Pranav Malhotra,  
Founder & CEO, TruNativ**

**Examples:**

- A UAE retailer has built a strong sourcing ecosystem in India to support both domestic and regional operations.
- An Indian personal care company established manufacturing in the UAE to meet regulatory requirements and improve responsiveness.

**Lesson:** Companies across the India-UAE corridor should leverage each other’s strengths to succeed in both markets.

## Regulatory & compliance

Despite trade facilitation under CEPA, regulatory complexity remains a significant challenge. In India, while policies are becoming more favorable, implementation varies across states, creating operational challenges. Compliance requirements related to sourcing, taxation, and licensing add further complexity. For its part, the UAE offers a more streamlined regulatory environment, but strict compliance standards — particularly for product certification and labor policies — must be met. Non-tariff barriers, including labeling requirements and certification processes, also impact time-to-market and cost structures.

### Examples:

- Indian exporters adapted production processes to meet UAE halal certification requirements.
- A UAE fashion retailer developed a localized sourcing strategy to comply with India's FDI regulations.

**Lesson:** Early planning and local expertise are critical to navigating regulatory requirements effectively.

### Cultural fit

Cultural differences play a critical role in cross-border expansion. While India and the UAE share strong economic ties, their business environments differ significantly in decision-making styles, organizational structures, and consumer expectations.

In the UAE, business practices are formal, structured, and fast-paced, with high expectations for efficiency. In India, decision-making can be more layered and relationship-driven, often leading to longer timelines.

*"Entering with precision, not scale, allowed us to learn rapidly from culturally dense markets and carry those insights into our multicultural stores in Gold Souk, Abu Dhabi and Sharjah."*

**Aditya Singh,**  
**Head, International Business (Jewelry),**  
**Titan Company Limited**

Talent dynamics also differ. The UAE relies heavily on a multinational workforce with increasing localization requirements, while India offers a large, young talent pool but faces high attrition rates. Companies must also manage internal cultural integration, particularly in partnerships and joint ventures, where differences in work styles and expectations can create friction.

## 4. CROSS-BORDER SUCCESS

While companies in both India and the UAE are at different points in their journeys, several have developed repeatable, scalable, and commercially viable expansion models. The most successful examples demonstrate how firms have leveraged localization, strategic partnerships, and innovation to unlock sustained value — often using one market as a growth corridor to accelerate expansion in the other.

### FROM INDIA TO THE UAE

The expansion of Indian brands into the UAE provides valuable insights into how companies can successfully navigate a premium, globally competitive retail environment.

#### **Tanishq (Titan Company): From exports to experiential retail**

The expansion of Titan Company's gold and diamond jewelry business, Tanishq, into the UAE is a case study in moving up the value chain from B2B to brand-led B2C. Historically, Indian gold exports to Dubai were routed through wholesalers to stock local chains. However, Titan leveraged CEPA's removal of 5% duty and the high trust in Indian bridal jewelry to launch its own experiential stores across Dubai, Sharjah, and Abu Dhabi.

In February 2026, Titan also announced the acquisition of a 67% stake in Dubai-based Damas Jewellery for \$283 million.<sup>14</sup> The move gives Titan control over 146 retail stores across six GCC countries, significantly expanding its Middle East footprint. The objective is to leverage Damas' strong brand equity and multicultural customer base to accelerate Titan's growth beyond the Indian diaspora and strengthen presence in the region's

premium jewelry market. The move also allows the company to tap into the Gulf's lower tariffs and freezone manufacturing advantages for exports, particularly to high-potential markets like the United States.

#### **Why it worked:**

- Tanishq was localized for a multicultural UAE, blending Indian craftsmanship with Arabic design cues and region-specific campaigns.
- The company competed on experience, not purity, delivering hospitality-led service, multilingual staff, and personalized shopping.
- Phygital retail strengthened differentiation, using endless aisle strategy, virtual try-ons, and unified customer relationship management (CRM) to enhance discovery and conversion.
- The business entered with precision and scaled with insight, refining formats in culturally dense micro-markets before expanding across the UAE.
- Tanishq owned the customer relationship, avoiding wholesale-led commoditization in a price-competitive category.

**Strategic insight:** The UAE served as a test market for Tanishq's global ambitions, giving the brand access to premium consumers, brand visibility across the GCC, and distribution partnerships (e.g., with Sharaf Group) that could be scaled into Saudi and Qatar.

#### **Britannia Industries: Operating locally, thinking regionally**

Leading Indian multinational food products company, Britannia Industries, changed its approach in order to succeed in the UAE market. Specifically, the company switched from an export-led model to owning manufacturing

<sup>14</sup> "Titan Completes Acquisition of 67% Stake in Damas Jewellery Business," Business Standard, 6 February 2026.

in Dubai and Oman — a move that prioritized supply chain integration over opportunistic exports. Today, through Strategic Foods International, Britannia localizes mass-market stock keeping units (SKUs) for the Gulf while importing premium lines from India.

#### Why it worked:

- Gulf manufacturing reduced logistics costs and enabled faster retail replenishment.
- Hybrid production preserved brand consistency while optimizing for cost and taste profiles.
- Distribution partnerships with Carrefour, Lulu, and Amazon.ae created an omnichannel footprint.

**Strategic insight:** Britannia's presence supports dual value capture. It not only monetizes Gulf demand but also channels Indian-origin processed foods through CEPA duty-free pipelines into modern trade, strengthening India's food export narrative.

#### Marico: Heritage brands, regional customization

The UAE success of Indian FMCG giant, Marico, stems from the company's ability to balance Ayurvedic credibility with regional nuance. Its Parachute line, long trusted by Indian expats, was adapted into localized variants like Hammam Zait for Arab consumers. All operations flow through Marico Middle East FZE in Jebel Ali Free Zone (JAFZA).

#### Why it worked:

- CEPA reduced costs on finished imports, improving competitiveness in a crowded personal care market.
- Focusing on B2B retail (salons, pharmacies, and supermarket chain Carrefour) instead of operating its own stores, aligned with Gulf's distribution-heavy ecosystem.
- Marico localized not just products but

packaging, certifications, and influencer messaging.

**Strategic insight:** Marico showcases how Indian firms can use the UAE not merely as a diaspora export market, but as a regional lab for developing premium, halal-certified beauty and wellness products.

## UAE: INVESTING IN INDIA

UAE-based companies have also demonstrated success in entering and scaling within the Indian market, often leveraging their experience in managing complex retail environments.

#### Apparel Group: Bilateral retail orchestration

Dubai-based fashion and retail conglomerate, Apparel Group, has a footprint extends two ways. In India, it has launched fashion brands like R&B and intends to expand Carrefour hypermarkets. Simultaneously, Nysaa — a joint venture between Apparel Group and Indian beauty company, Nykaa, is taking Indian D2C beauty to the Gulf with 100 planned stores.

#### Why it worked:

- Created a bi-directional retail corridor, where brands flow in both directions.
- Leveraged Apparel's mall and logistics muscle, Nykaa's curation and digital DNA.
- Targeted younger, digital-native consumers underserved by traditional players.

**Strategic insight:** This model represents modern Gulf-India cooperation. The relationship is not just about investment, but co-creation of brands and platforms tailored to both markets. It sets the tone for retail partnerships in an omnichannel, post-CEPA era. The model also transforms India into both a market and supplier base.

**LuLu Group: From hypermarkets to market-makers**

LuLu Group is not just a UAE retail giant; in India, it has emerged as a market enabler. Starting with Kochi's landmark LuLu Mall, it has developed an infrastructure-led strategy: real estate + food processing + hypermarket retail.

**Why it worked:**

- LuLu focused on under-penetrated Tier 2 cities where infrastructure was lacking but consumer appetite was rising.
- The group acted as an ecosystem builder, generating jobs, attracting global tenants, and improving supply chains.
- The business used India's scale to support the UAE's food security corridor, setting up sourcing hubs and export units.

**Strategic insight:** LuLu's model highlights mutual reinforcement — its Indian malls boost consumption, and its Indian food exports reduce the UAE's import dependency. It transforms India into both a market and supplier base.

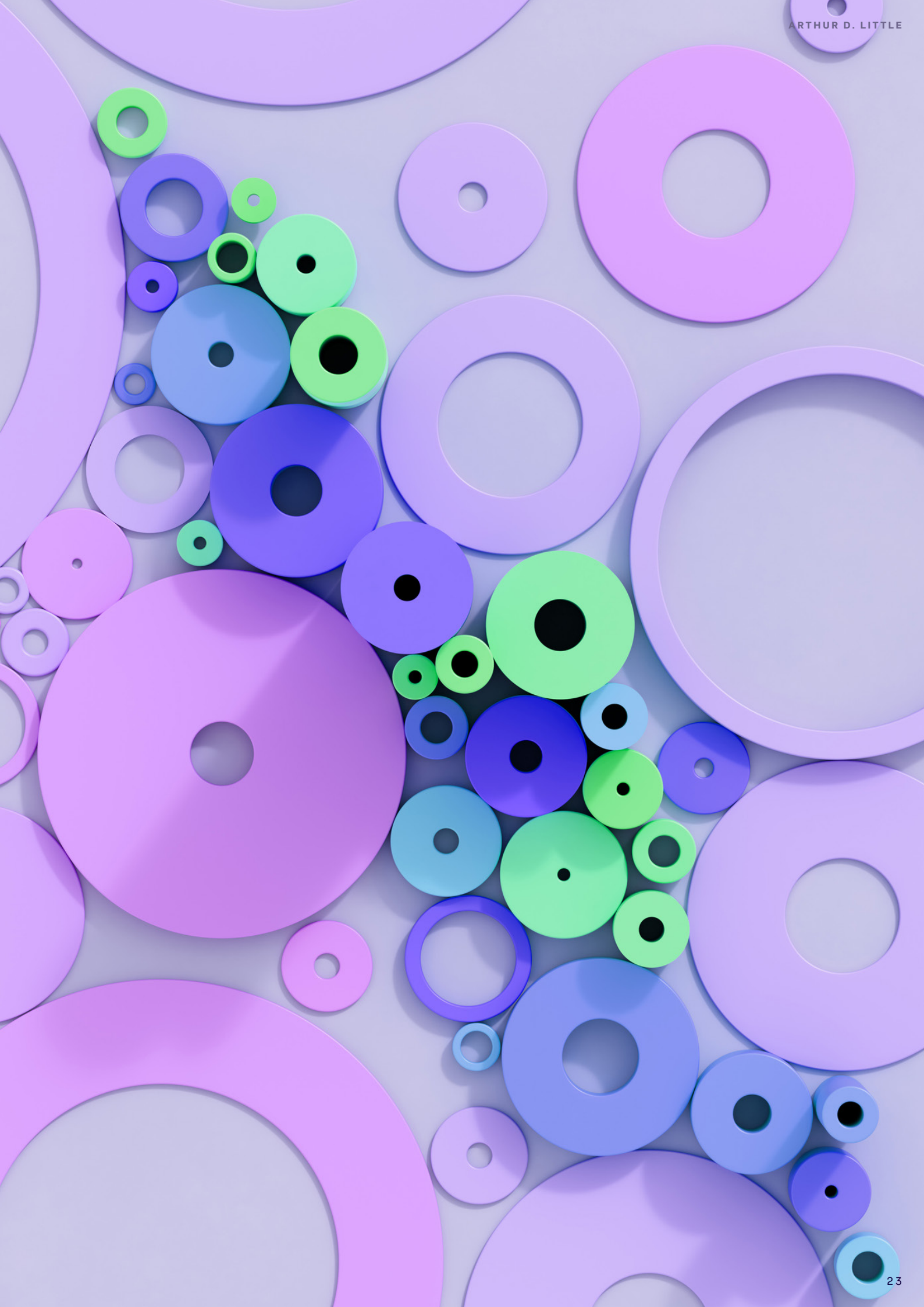
**Landmark Group: Design-driven value retail for a diverse India**

Landmark Group, one of the region's largest retail conglomerates, has built a strong India presence over the past 25 years through brands such as Lifestyle, Max Fashion, Home Centre, and Babyshop. Its value-focused, design-led approach has enabled it to scale in India's competitive and fragmented market.

**Why it worked:**

- Landmark targeted key city clusters instead of nationwide expansion, improving efficiency and returns.
- The group delivered mid-value, design-led assortments suited to India's price-aware but aspirational consumers.
- The business integrated with the key digital market players in India such as Myntra and Flipkart to increase reach.
- Landmark developed a strong omnichannel model, leveraging rising digital adoption and UPI-led payments.

**Strategic insight:** Landmark's India journey shows that disciplined market selection, value-led merchandizing, and omnichannel execution are essential for sustaining long-term success across both the UAE and India.



## 5. RECOMMENDATIONS & PRIORITIES

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BUSINESS

As demonstrated by the examples above, cross-border expansion between India and the UAE offers structural growth opportunities, but success requires moving beyond opportunistic exports to deliberate, locally embedded strategies. Based on market analysis and case learnings, five priorities stand out:

#### 1. Treat India and the UAE as distinct micro-markets, not extensions of home markets.

Interview participants highlighted the need to invest early in granular consumer segmentation, localized product propositions, and culturally attuned branding. India demands regional and price-tier precision, while the UAE requires curated assortments and premium experiences beyond diaspora demand.

#### 2. Anchor market entry on partnerships and ecosystem leverage.

Executive insights underscore the fact that joint ventures, franchising, and strategic alliances with established local players materially reduce execution risk. Strong partners accelerate access to real estate, distribution, regulatory navigation, and consumer insight, particularly critical in India's fragmented landscape and the UAE's consolidated retail ecosystem.

#### 3. Design channel strategies around omnichannel realities.

In India, winning models blend general trade reach with digital-first discovery and quick commerce. In the UAE, mall-led physical retail must be tightly integrated with marketplaces and last-mile fulfilment. Channel choices should follow category economics and consumer missions, not legacy preferences.

#### 4. Localize operating models and supply chains for speed and compliance.

Companies should align sourcing, manufacturing, and warehousing decisions to local cost structures, service expectations, and regulatory requirements. Hybrid models, combining regional manufacturing with targeted imports — offer resilience, margin control, and CEPA-enabled advantages.

#### 5. Institutionalize regulatory and cultural readiness.

Companies in the UAE and India highlight that regulatory compliance, certification (e.g., halal, Food Safety and Standards Authority of India), and CEPA rules of origin must be planned upfront. Equally, leadership teams must adapt to different decision-making styles, talent expectations, and business norms to ensure effective partnerships and internal execution.

### POLICY PRIORITIES TO ACCELERATE INDIA-UAE RETAIL TRADE

The evolution of the India-UAE consumer corridor does not only depend on the actions of businesses and wider market forces but also on the ability of policymakers to address structural frictions and enable smoother cross-border operations.

While CEPA has created a strong foundation, interviews with industry leaders suggest that the next phase of growth will require a more operational focus — one that addresses the practical realities of doing business across both markets.

## Priorities for governments

### 1. Harmonizing standards and certification frameworks.

One of the most frequently cited challenges across interviews relates to the lack of alignment in standards and certification requirements. While both India and the UAE maintain robust regulatory systems, the absence of mutual recognition creates duplication and delays. Greater harmonization — particularly in areas such as halal certification, food safety standards, and labeling requirements — could significantly reduce time-to-market and compliance costs.

### 2. Simplifying cross-border logistics and trade processes.

Both countries have invested heavily in infrastructure, yet companies continue to face procedural inefficiencies that impact speed and cost. Issues such as documentation requirements, customs clearance timelines, and coordination between different agencies can create delays, particularly for perishable or time-sensitive goods. Here, greater digitization and integration of trade processes, including the adoption of unified digital platforms would allow for end-to-end visibility.

### 3. Enabling digital payments and financial integration.

The rapid growth of digital commerce in India, combined with the UAE's advanced financial ecosystem, presents an opportunity to create more seamless cross-border payment solutions. However, there are ongoing challenges related to payment interoperability, transaction costs, and regulatory differences. Enabling greater integration between payment systems could significantly enhance the efficiency of cross-border retail transactions.

### 4. Streamlining regulatory approvals.

Interview participants cited the need to reduce approval timelines and increase transparency in regulatory processes. Delays in approvals, particularly in sectors such as food and health-related products, can impact product launches and inventory planning. Therefore, greater clarity around requirements, combined with faster processing timelines, could encourage business confidence and investment.

# CONCLUSION — FROM TRADE CORRIDOR TO CONSUMER ECOSYSTEM

The India-UAE consumer corridor is entering a new phase, shifting from trade to true integration. Success will not come from market entry alone, but from building locally grounded, resilient businesses that reflect the realities of each market.

The winners will be those who adapt rather than standardize — those who understand India's complexity, match the UAE's demand for excellence, and invest deeply in partnerships and supply chains as strategic advantages.

With the right policy support to reduce friction and enable flow, the corridor's next chapter will be defined not by the movement of goods, but by the creation of shared value, and of an ecosystem now shaping the future of retail and consumer growth.

## ABOUT UIBC-UC

The UAE India Business Council-UAE Chapter (UIBC-UC), established on 18 February 2023 under the patronage of India's Ministry of External Affairs and the UAE's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, is the official joint chamber promoting strategic economic collaboration under CEPA. With a robust network comprising 15 founding members representing the apex Indian and Emirati business organizations, UIBC-UC commands assets exceeding \$1 trillion, positioning itself as a premier catalyst for shaping the economic trajectory of both nations.

Committed to identifying and seizing strategic opportunities, UIBC-UC prioritizes investments in key sectors such as large infrastructure

projects, manufacturing, technology, hybrid renewable energy initiatives, IT, tourism infrastructure, shipping, and facilitating Indian businesses to leverage the UAE as a global expansion hub.

The Council plays a key role in advancing CEPA's objectives of increasing bilateral non-oil trade to \$100 billion and securing \$75 billion in UAE investments into India by 2030. At UIBC-UC, we envision a future defined by unparalleled collaboration, innovation, and prosperity, ushering in an era of sustainable economic growth for both the UAE and India.

For further information on the UIBC-UC's activities, please consult our website, [www.uibcuae.com](http://www.uibcuae.com).





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