

# Winning the Hearts of UAE consumers: Examining Walmart's entry into the UAE market

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## Abstract

Walmart is a supermarket brand recognised and respected around the world. It has transformed the shopping experience of consumers in the West from initially a grocery shopping experience to a one-stop shop experience where you get everything. This has been attributed to Walmart's hypermarket structure which involves offering customers as many products as possible under one roof. Despite the obvious benefits for consumers in terms of their shopping experience by shopping at Walmart, there has been no presence established by Walmart in MENA (Middle East and North Africa) based countries. This is especially the case for the United Arab Emirates (UAE) which is home to residents who are originally from all over the world which includes countries like India, Lebanon, the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States of America, China and Nigeria. Therefore, there is a demand for retailers offering international brands which has been demonstrated by the growth and success of a significant number of malls. Based on this there may be a demand for Walmart to have a presence in the UAE which is further supported by Carrefour's success in the UAE which is a business of similar stature and profile to Walmart.

The first Walmart opened in the USA in 1962 by an entrepreneur named Sam Walton. By 1970, Walmart became a publicly traded company which was attributed to its significant growth in terms of revenue and store numbers in the USA. In 1980, Walmart achieved another milestone in the form of reaching 1 billion dollars in annual revenue where Walmart had 276 stores and over 21000 employees. In 1991, Walmart went global through a joint venture with Cifra where it established its first international branch in Mexico. This was followed by Walmart expanding into Canada in 1994 and into China in 1996. Then, Asda expanded into the UK in 1998 through acquiring the established supermarket chain of Asda. Walmart then employed innovative methods like being one of the first supermarkets globally to start offering customers the option of online shopping and home delivery from the late nineties. This innovative step by Walmart aligns with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure). In 2005, Walmart made a major statement by becoming a more sustainable business through CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) practices ensuring zero waste and selling products that were environmentally sustainable which aligns with SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities). However, in recent years Walmart has downsized global operations, for example, TDR Capital acquired Asda from Walmart in 2021. Therefore, despite recent setbacks, expansion into new markets may be an opportunity for Walmart to further flourish and grow.

The purpose of this case study is to challenge readers to propose an appropriate road map for Walmart to successfully enter the UAE market. An overview and background for Walmart is provided in this paper which is then followed by recommendations for Walmart's future steps outlined by the authors.

**Keywords:** Walmart; UAE; MENA; Hypermarkets; SDGs; Innovative methods; Consumer behaviour.

## 1. Introduction

A supermarket is a store which offers the most essential items under one roof. For example, in the United Kingdom (UK) there are supermarkets like Asda, Tesco, Sainsbury's, Morrison's and Lidl (Ikonen, 2021). Even amongst supermarkets, there are different types of supermarkets based on the size of their stores, eg Asda, Sainsbury's and Tesco are hypermarkets which combine a superstore with a department store while other supermarkets like Morrison's and Lidl are not necessarily hypermarket size (Nolet, 2017). The introduction of the supermarket model has transformed the lives of consumers in terms of cost and convenience where consumers have opted to shop at superstores in comparison to traditionally shopping at the local convenience store (Farrell, 2020).

Nowadays, it is expected of a supermarket to offer all types of food items plus clothes, gardening items, IT items, entertainment products and seasonal products like Christmas trees and decorations for the festive season (Piercy, 2023). Retail food stores are believed to have originated in Ancient Roman times. Supermarkets can be traced back to the Astor Market and Piggly Wiggly in the USA in the 1910s (Stanton, 2017). The concept of the superstore can be traced back to the 1930s when Fred Meyer introduced a one-stop store in the United States of America (USA) (Meyer Memorial Trust, 2025). An image of the Fred Meyer's One-Stop Store is provided in Fig. 1.



**Fig. 1.** Fred Meyer's One-Stop Store  
**Source.** Meyer Memorial Trust, 2025

As shown in Fig.1, Fred Meyer's One-Stop Store was established in a completely different era to present times. These initial versions of supermarkets were on a much smaller scale in comparison to the modern supermarkets that consumers have become accustomed to. These initial versions of supermarkets offered fruit, vegetables, bakery and meat-based products (Meyer Memorial Trust, 2025).

As per the modern specifications of the supermarket, it appears that King Kullen in the USA may have been the original incarnation of the supermarket concept with a high volume of products stacked high on shelves at lower prices (Ross, 2016). After the introduction of supermarkets through different banners to the US market, the concept of supermarkets became widely accepted across North America by the end of the 1950s (Nolet, 2017). The concept of the supermarket took longer to catch on in the UK and Europe in comparison to North America but by the end of the 1960s supermarkets became a regular fixture (Farrell, 2020). Other regions like the Middle East, Central Asia, the Far East and Africa welcomed the supermarket model from the nineties onwards (Farrell, 2020; Wu, 2018). The fruit and vegetable aisle within a Walmart store in China is shown in Fig. 2.



**Fig. 2.** The first Walmart in China  
**Source.** Wu, 2018

As demonstrated in Fig. 2, the inside of China based Walmarts are similar to the Western versions of the store. From the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century onwards, a group of supermarkets emerged as the leading supermarkets in the world where Walmart positioned itself as the leading global supermarket (Wheeler, 2024).

## 2. Background of Walmart

The first Walmart branch was opened by Sam Walton in the USA in 1962 where the Walmart business was incorporated in 1969 (Walmart, 2025). Sam Walton is in Fig. 3.



**Fig. 3.** Sam Walton  
**Source.** Walmart, 2025

As seen in Fig. 3, Sam Walton proudly signified his affiliation with Walmart through wearing clothing with the Walmart signage. Walmart established itself in the USA as the leading retailer based on profits in 1988 where it then became the biggest retailer in the USA in 1989 (O'Connell, 2020). In terms of products and services, Walmart offers consumers groceries, electrical goods, clothing, and home accessories where it also offers additional services like fuel and financial services (Schmidbauer, 2018). Walmart has physical stores in the form of discount stores, superstores, and warehouse clubs in addition to having an online presence to take customer orders through its app and website (Walmart, 2025). Walmart has over 10,500 stores worldwide in 27 countries which are located in countries like the UK, Mexico, India, South Africa, Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, China, Japan, Canada, and Argentina (World Atlas, 2025). The first Walmart Store is shown in Fig. 4.



**Fig. 4.** The first Walmart in the UK  
**Source.** BBC, 2001

As shown in Fig. 4, the initial version of Walmart UK stores was quite different from the modern look of the stores. Currently, Walmart is a publicly traded company with the Walton family having the controlling share (50% share). In terms of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) practices, Walmart has invested over \$1 billion in education and skills to better support citizens from deprived backgrounds. Walmart has a target for zero emissions by 2040 and 100% renewable energy by 2035 (Walmart, 2025).

### **3. Challenges encountered by Walmart**

Despite Walmart's position as one of the leading supermarkets in the world, Walmart has encountered challenges in the market for it to be recognised as a retailer of lower quality products in comparison to rivals like Tesco and Sainsbury's. The emergence

of new rivals like Amazon and Target has added greater pressure on Walmart as their overheads are comparatively lower than Walmart and there is no need for them to have as many physical stores as Walmart (Balasubramanian, 2024). This deficit in cost between Walmart and these newer rivals may have put Walmart in a compromising position. In several locations around the world, Walmart has been challenged for low compensation packages and poor working conditions by existing and former employees (Delesline, 2023; Tobin, 2022). Walmart did face concerns from the public that it was not a sustainable business which was attributed to its significant levels of waste and non-recyclable food packaging (Ren, 2023). However, in recent years, Walmart has overcome these challenges by effectively embedding sustainability-based initiatives into its operations which has better aligned the business with the circular economy (Buck, 2024).

4. Potential Entry into the UAE market

The UAE is home to supermarket brands like Carrefour, Baqer Mohebi Supermarket, Union Co-op, United Hypermarket, Day to Day Hypermarket, Lulu Hypermarket, Emirates General Market, Geant Hypermarket, West Zone, Waitrose, Nesto Supermarket, and Spinneys (Statista, 2021). These brands are from all over the world where Carrefour (originally from France) and West Zone (established by a locally resident Indian family) are the most dominant supermarket chains (Carrefour, 2025; West Zone Supermarket, 2025). A comparison between the stores in the UAE is illustrated in Fig. 5 below.

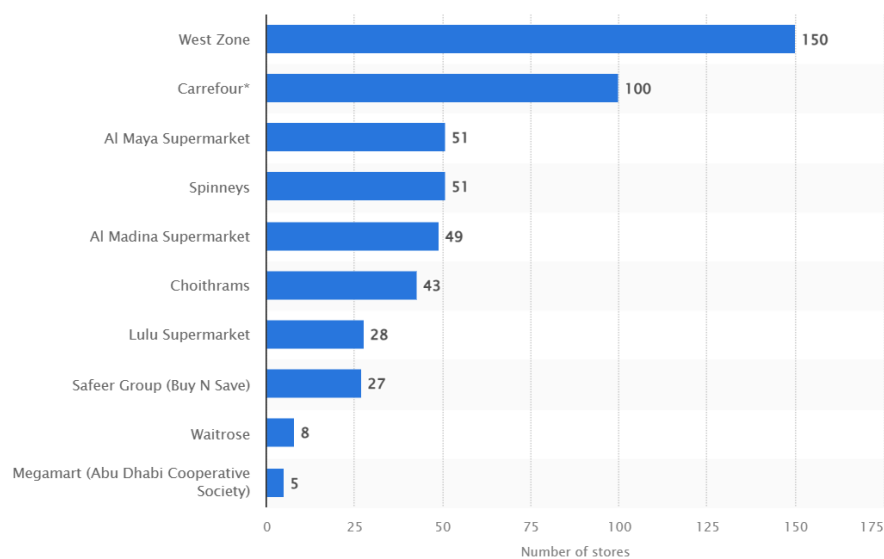


Fig. 5. Supermarkets in the UAE  
Source. Statista, 2021

As shown in Fig. 5, West Zone is the market leader in the UAE in terms of store numbers. Carrefour and West Zone have benefitted from first mover advantage which has prevented other widely established brands like Walmart and Tesco from entering the UAE market. It appears that Walmart’s entry into the UAE is a challenging proposition as the UAE market consists of competitors that have been established in the market for a significant amount of time. Therefore, Walmart will need to enter by offering customers a unique selling point to its UAE-based rivals.

Additionally, the prospect of establishing itself in the market will require Walmart to make significant investments which will involve investment in real estate, innovative technology infrastructure, hiring personnel and long-term and comprehensive marketing campaigns to establish itself as a widely known brand in the UAE. Therefore, the option of franchising may be a feasible and cost-effective option for Walmart.

5. Recommendations

The authors recommend that Walmart drive innovation in its operations and its product lines through its research and development division. Innovative approaches and technologies may support Walmart’s entry and growth in the UAE market where a positive correlation between business growth and innovation has been demonstrated in several studies (Aseer, 2024; Gernal et al., 2024; Gilani et al., 2023b; Gilani et al., 2024). However, innovation is highly dependent on reliable infrastructure which is highlighted by Gilani and Faccia (2022) regardless of sector and region (Al Jaghoub et al., 2024; Gilani et al., 2022; Krupicka et al., 2024). Additionally, authors have highlighted that the level of innovation adoption is possibly dependent on leadership styles and gender roles in leadership positions within businesses as well (Gilani et al., 2023a; Moussa et al., 2024; Sulthan et al., 2022).



The benefits of innovative practices in addition to business growth and survival have been demonstrated to also enhance the customer experience in other industries like Higher Education which may aid Walmart in attracting and retaining customers in the UAE market. The authors also recommend that Walmart build partnerships with universities in the UAE to better improve its recruitment process and potentially enhance innovative output through business incubator-based collaborations with universities (Yasin and Gilani, 2022; Yasin et al., 2023). The significance of organizational health in sustaining business performance is crucial for Walmart's successful entry into the UAE market (Jaafari et al., 2023). The role of psychological resilience in workplace adaptability is a key factor in Walmart's ability to integrate into the UAE's competitive retail sector (Tantry & Singh, 2016). Gender differences in resilience can help Walmart tailor its workforce strategies to align with the UAE's diverse labour market (Tantry & Puri-Singh, 2017). Transformational leadership enhances job satisfaction, which Walmart must adopt to create a motivated workforce in the UAE (Khan et al., 2023). The impact of strategic leadership in digitalization can be leveraged by Walmart for e-commerce expansion in the UAE's retail industry (Golshan Sorour et al., 2024). Employee engagement and retention are critical for Walmart's HR policies to ensure workforce stability in the UAE (Mainali & Tantry, 2022). The influence of big data and AI can enhance consumer insights and optimize supply chain management in the UAE market (Iyer et al., 2024). Total quality management and performance are essential for Walmart to maintain competitive service quality in the UAE (Hussein & Tantry, 2022). Job satisfaction among secondary school staff provides insights into Walmart's need to develop employee-centric policies for long-term retention in the UAE (Tantry & Ali, 2020). The gender impact on business growth can inform Walmart's market strategy to ensure inclusive consumer engagement in the UAE retail sector (Gilani et al., 2025).

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