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From Iconic Chain to Optimised Network: A Strategic Review of Vips in Spain

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Abstract

This consulting project addresses the strategic situation of VIPS, one of the most recognized casual dining chains in Spain, in a market characterized by structural transformation, intensifying competitive pressure, and the emergence of non-traditional players such as supermarket ready-to-eat offerings. The brand, owned by the Mexican multinational Alsea since 2018, operates a chain of 170 restaurants in Spain heavily concentrated in the Madrid region, while facing the erosion of a generalist positioning that has lost differentiating power against more focused competitors and overlaps with sister brands within the Alsea portfolio.

The objective of the project is to evaluate the VIPS chain at the individual restaurant level and to identify differentiated strategic actions for groups of restaurants with similar profiles. The methodology combines the diagnosis of the client and the industry context with the systematic compilation of publicly available data for each of the 170 locations, the calculation of descriptive statistics, and the application of a two-step cluster analysis in IBM SPSS Statistics. The analysis incorporates seven variables capturing the locational, socioeconomic, operational, and performance-related dimensions of each restaurant.

The cluster analysis identifies four homogeneous groups of restaurants within the chain, validated through a silhouette measure of cohesion and separation in the "good" range. The four clusters correspond to the Madrid prime portfolio (38.2% of the chain), mall-based locations outside Madrid with and without terrace (28.2% and 18.8% respectively), and street-level restaurants outside Madrid (14.7%). The classification reveals that the Madrid cluster combines the highest socioeconomic environment and the highest perceived service quality, while the smallest cluster of street locations outside Madrid exhibits the weakest performance profile.

Building on this segmentation, the project proposes a set of strategic recommendations differentiated by cluster, complemented by transversal actions across the chain. Central to the recommendations is the launch of a premium VIPS flagship in a prime Madrid location, designed to address the brand's loss of differentiated positioning and generate brand-level uplift. Cluster-specific actions reinforce the strongest segments, defend the most exposed ones against ready-to-eat competition, and resolve the weakest segment through case-by-case evaluation. Transversal recommendations include a focused regional expansion into a second Spanish metropolitan area to reduce the dependency on Madrid, a chain-wide upgrade of perceived service quality, and a coordinated portfolio review with Alsea. The recommendations are sequenced into a three-horizon implementation roadmap that combines early-momentum initiatives with longer-term structural transformation.

Beyond the specific case of VIPS, the project contributes a replicable methodology for the evaluation of restaurant chains in the absence of internal performance data, applicable to other operators facing similar challenges in adapting their portfolios to evolving market conditions.

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1. Introduction

The Spanish restaurant industry has undergone a significant transformation in recent years, driven by changes in consumer behavior, technological advancements, and increasing competitive pressure. Within this environment, the casual dining segment, historically characterized by established brands and standardized concepts, has been particularly affected by the emergence of new formats such as fast-casual concepts, delivery platforms, and more flexible dining alternatives. At the same time, non-traditional players like supermarket chains with ready-to-eat offerings have started to capture demand occasions that were once exclusive to restaurants, further intensifying competition.

These changes have made it critical for established restaurant chains to continuously reassess their business models and operational strategies. In particular, the optimization of the store portfolio has become a central lever for maintaining competitiveness. Location decisions, traditionally seen as long-term and relatively fixed, are now subject to greater scrutiny as urban dynamics evolve and consumer preferences shift. Restaurant chains can no longer treat their store networks as static structures, but rather as dynamic portfolios of assets that require ongoing evaluation, prioritization, and adaptation.

1.1. The client and the challenge

This consulting project focuses on VIPS, one of the most recognized casual dining chains in Spain. With a long-standing presence in the market, over five decades of history, and a wide chain of restaurants distributed across different cities and formats, VIPS is a culturally embedded brand particularly anchored in the Madrid region. However, the brand currently operates in a competitive environment that has changed fundamentally since its original concept was introduced in 1969, and its strategic positioning faces growing pressure from multiple directions.

The challenge that motivates this engagement is rooted in three converging dynamics. First, the erosion of the brand's differentiated positioning: the all-day casual dining proposition that defined VIPS for decades competes today against more focused alternatives in every category it serves, without being the clear leader in any of them. Second, the heterogeneity of the store portfolio: not all VIPS locations face the same competitive context, and undifferentiated decisions at the chain level risk overlooking the specific challenges and opportunities of each restaurant. Third, the internal portfolio dynamics within Alsea, the Mexican multinational that owns VIPS since 2018: the brand competes for capital allocation against sister brands such as Foster's Hollywood, which occupies a partially overlapping position in the casual dining segment. This creates the potential for cannibalization risks and underscores the need for clearly differentiated strategic positioning across the group's portfolio.

In this context, the central question that this consulting project addresses is: how can the VIPS restaurant chain in Spain be optimized through a systematic evaluation of its individual locations, so that the brand can sustain competitiveness in a transforming sector while clarifying its strategic role within the broader Alsea portfolio?

1.2. Approach and scope

To address this challenge, the project follows a data-driven approach based on publicly available information. Given the absence of access to internal performance data such as store-level revenue or profitability, the analysis relies on a combination of qualitative observation of each location and objective external indicators that can be systematically collected for all restaurants in the

chain. These indicators are then used to identify patterns within the portfolio, classify each location according to its strategic situation, and derive concrete recommendations.

The scope of the project covers the full set of 170 VIPS restaurants operating in Spain at the time of the engagement, identified from the official VIPS store locator. The geographic focus is national, although particular attention is paid to the Madrid region given its disproportionate weight within the chain. The temporal horizon of the recommendations is the short and medium term (next 24 months), aligned with the typical planning cycle of restaurant chain operators.

The deliverable of this consulting project is twofold: a structured diagnosis of the VIPS portfolio that identifies the strategic situation of each location, and a set of actionable recommendations that the client can pursue, both at the individual restaurant level and at the chain level. Beyond the specific case of VIPS, the methodology developed here is designed to be replicable for other restaurant chains facing similar challenges in adapting their portfolios to evolving market conditions.

1.3. Structure of the document

The document follows the structure typically adopted in consulting engagements, which moves sequentially from problem definition to diagnosis, recommendations, and implementation (Rasiel, 1999). After this introduction, Section 2 presents the diagnosis of the situation, starting with the client itself (VIPS, its history, its current positioning, and its place within the Alsea portfolio) and broadening to the industry context in which it operates, before closing with a synthesis of the strategic challenge through a SWOT analysis. Section 3 describes the methodology used to evaluate the 170 locations of the VIPS chain, including the variables considered, the analytical approach, and the criteria for classification. Section 4 presents the results of the analysis, identifying the strategic situation of each group of locations within the chain. Section 5 translates these findings into a set of strategic recommendations differentiated by group of locations and complemented by transversal actions. Section 6 proposes an implementation roadmap that sequences the recommendations over the short, medium, and long term. Section 7 summarizes the main conclusions of the project.

2. Diagnosis

This section presents the diagnosis of the situation that motivates the consulting project. It starts with the client itself, VIPS, describing its history, its current positioning, its place within the Alsea portfolio, and the characteristics of its store portfolio in Spain. It then broadens the lens to the industry context in which the chain operates, identifying the structural dynamics that shape the competitive environment. Finally, it synthesizes the diagnosis through a SWOT analysis focused specifically on VIPS, which crystallizes the strategic challenge that the rest of the document addresses.

2.1. The client: VIPS

2.1.1. Background and historical evolution

VIPS is one of the most iconic casual dining chains in the Spanish restaurant industry, with a history that spans more than five decades and a deep cultural footprint, particularly in Madrid. Founded in 1969 by Plácido Arango, the original VIPS concept introduced a format that was unprecedented in Spain at the time: an all-day dining venue that combined cafeteria, restaurant, retail shop, and press kiosk under a single roof, with extended opening hours that often reached

past midnight (Grupo VIPS, n.d.). This hybrid format, inspired by American diner and drugstore concepts, filled a gap in the Spanish hospitality landscape and quickly turned VIPS into a reference point for urban consumers seeking convenience, variety, and reliability outside traditional meal hours.

Over the following decades, the original brand evolved into Grupo VIPS, an umbrella company that came to operate a portfolio of complementary restaurant concepts including Ginos, Fridays, The Wok, and the Spanish master franchise of Starbucks, among others (Alsea, 2025a). This expansion consolidated Grupo VIPS as one of the leading independent restaurant operators in Spain and reinforced the brand's positioning within the casual dining segment. However, despite the diversification of the broader group, the VIPS brand itself remained anchored in its original all-day dining proposition, which over time became increasingly difficult to differentiate as competing concepts emerged.

A turning point in the trajectory of the brand came at the end of 2018, when the Mexican multinational Alsea closed the acquisition of Grupo VIPS in a transaction that valued the company at approximately €500 million in equity terms and €575 million including debt, implying a multiple of 13.2x EV/EBITDA (Expansión, 2018). The acquisition involved the founding Arango family along with the private equity firm ProA Capital as sellers. At the time of the operation, Grupo VIPS managed approximately 349 corporate restaurants and 90 franchised units across six brands in Spain, Portugal and Andorra, with around 19,500 employees (Expansión, 2018). The transaction marked the transition of VIPS from an independent Spanish family business into a brand managed within the portfolio of one of the largest restaurant operators in Latin America and Europe. The integration into Alsea brought a more structured corporate governance model, access to international best practices, and exposure to portfolio-level strategic logic, but it also placed VIPS in direct internal comparison with other brands operated by the group.

The years following the acquisition were shaped by the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent restructuring of the restaurant portfolio. Like most casual dining operators in Spain, VIPS faced a sharp decline in demand during 2020 and 2021, which accelerated the closure of underperforming locations and prompted a reassessment of the brand's strategic direction within the Alsea portfolio. In the post-pandemic recovery, VIPS has remained a relevant brand in the Spanish casual dining landscape, but its relative weight within Alsea has diminished compared to brands with stronger international growth trajectories. This evolution explains why the question of repositioning has become particularly relevant for VIPS today: the brand operates with a long-established portfolio and a recognizable identity, but in a competitive environment that has fundamentally changed since the concept was first introduced.

2.1.2. Alsea as parent company and strategic context

Understanding the strategic situation of VIPS requires placing the brand within the broader context of its parent company. Alsea is a Mexican-headquartered multinational restaurant operator that manages a portfolio of franchised and proprietary brands across Latin America and Europe, including Domino's Pizza, Starbucks (in selected markets), Foster's Hollywood, Ginos, Fridays, La Tagliatella, and VIPS (Alsea, 2025b). The European division of Alsea, which includes the Spanish operations, generated revenues of approximately 297 million euros in the third quarter of 2025, representing close to 30% of the group's total turnover (Restauración News, 2025b). This makes Spain a strategically important market for Alsea, but also a market in which the company manages multiple brands that compete in adjacent segments.

This portfolio structure has direct implications for the strategic management of VIPS. Decisions concerning the chain — whether to invest, refurbish, reposition, or close individual locations — are not taken in isolation, but within a logic of capital allocation across the entire Alsea portfolio. As anticipated in the introduction, VIPS competes not only against external operators but also for internal investment against sister brands such as Foster's Hollywood, which occupies a partially overlapping position in casual dining.

In addition, the absence of publicly disclosed store-level financial data for VIPS, which is common practice within multi-brand groups, reinforces the rationale for the methodological approach adopted in this project. In a context in which internal performance data is not accessible to external observers, a framework based on publicly available data offers a structured way to evaluate the chain from the outside, complementing the type of internal analysis that the company itself can perform with proprietary data.

2.1.3. Brand positioning and value proposition

The current positioning of VIPS can be understood as the legacy of the original 1969 concept, gradually adapted but never fundamentally redefined. The brand presents itself as a casual dining destination with a broad menu (including burgers, sandwiches, breakfasts, salads, and traditional Spanish dishes), extended opening hours, and a family-oriented atmosphere (VIPS, n.d.). Its target audience has historically been urban, middle-income consumers, families, and groups seeking a versatile dining option suitable for multiple occasions throughout the day. The brand promise has traditionally been one of reliability and convenience: a place where customers know what to expect and can find a meal at almost any hour.

However, in the current Spanish restaurant landscape, this all-things-to-all-people positioning faces a structural challenge. In each of the categories that historically defined the VIPS proposition, more focused competitors have emerged with stronger value propositions. In burgers, premium fast-casual brands such as Goiko, Five Guys, and TGB have captured the segment of consumers seeking a higher-quality burger experience (Alimarket, 2025b). In breakfasts and brunch, specialized cafés and bakery-coffee chains have built dedicated propositions around this occasion. In the daily-special segment, traditional bars continue to offer competitive alternatives, while supermarket ready-to-eat offerings, particularly Mercadona's "Listo para Comer", have emerged as a structurally disruptive new competitor for the working population, as discussed in Section 2.2 (KPMG & Circana, 2025). Even within the same Alsea portfolio, Foster's Hollywood occupies an overlapping space in family-oriented American casual dining.

It is worth noting that VIPS has recently introduced a daily-special offering ("Plato Perfecto" — "The Perfect Dish"), inspired by the Harvard healthy eating model (50% vegetables, 25% carbohydrates, 25% protein), priced at €15.95 (El Publicista, 2025). This price of daily specials is notably above the Spanish average of approximately €14.20 reported later in Section 2.2, signalling that VIPS is attempting to enter the lunch-menu segment without abandoning its premium positioning. While this represents a meaningful operational adaptation to changing consumer expectations, it does not in itself resolve the underlying strategic question of brand identity. Adding a new product without redefining the broader positioning may improve traffic on specific occasions but does not address the central challenge: VIPS competes against multiple specialized concepts simultaneously without being the clear leader in any single category. In a market where consumer attention is increasingly fragmented and where focused concepts capture mindshare more effectively than generalist propositions, this is the strategic dilemma at the heart of this consulting engagement.

2.1.4. The VIPS chain in Spain

The VIPS chain in Spain comprises 170 restaurants, distributed unevenly across the national territory and across different formats. All the chain-level data presented in this section have been compiled by the consultant from the official VIPS store locator, accessed at the start of the project (Pérez Ariza, 2026). The most striking feature of the chain is its extreme geographic concentration: 101 locations (59% of the total) are situated in the province of Madrid, with the remaining 41% spread across 31 other provinces. The next largest provincial clusters are Valencia (12 locations), Sevilla (6), Alicante (5), and Málaga and Zaragoza (4 each), while many provinces host only one or two restaurants. This distribution reflects the historical roots of the brand in Madrid and confirms that, in practice, VIPS operates as a Madrid-centric chain with a complementary national footprint, rather than as a fully developed nationwide chain.

In terms of format, 127 of the 170 locations (74.7%) are street-level restaurants, while 43 (25.3%) are situated within shopping malls (Pérez Ariza, 2026). This split is strategically relevant because street and mall formats face fundamentally different demand dynamics and operational conditions. Street locations are exposed to the variability of urban pedestrian flows and to direct competition from a wider range of nearby alternatives, whereas mall locations operate within controlled environments with captive family audiences and more predictable traffic patterns.

The distribution by area type reveals an additional and somewhat counterintuitive feature of the chain. Of the 170 locations, 111 (65%) are situated in mixed-use urban areas, 43 (25%) within shopping malls, only 14 (8%) in tourist areas, and just 2 (1%) in office areas (Pérez Ariza, 2026). The relatively small share of tourist locations is notable given that several of the most visible VIPS units are located on iconic Madrid streets such as Gran Vía, Puerta del Sol, and Calle de Alcalá. It indicates that, despite its presence in some of the most prominent commercial corridors of the country, VIPS draws the bulk of its activity from neighborhood-level demand rather than from international tourist flows. The minimal presence in office areas, in turn, reflects the historical reluctance of the brand to compete in the weekday lunch occasion against specialized fast-service operators, a positioning that the recent introduction of the daily-special offering aims to partially address.

Taken together, these characteristics paint the picture of a mature, geographically concentrated chain with a heterogeneous portfolio of locations across formats and area types. This heterogeneity is precisely what makes a structured evaluation framework necessary: not all VIPS restaurants face the same strategic situation, and undifferentiated decisions at the chain level risk overlooking the specific challenges and opportunities of each location.

2.2. Industry context

2.2.1. Overview of the Spanish restaurant industry

The restaurant industry in Spain represents a cornerstone of the national economy, both in terms of economic output and employment. With more than 264,000 establishments and approximately 2.75 million workers linked to the broader tourism and hospitality sector, foodservice plays a critical role in supporting domestic consumption and international tourism demand (Hostelería de España, 2025; INE, 2025).

In terms of market size, the Spanish foodservice sector is projected to reach approximately €43.5 billion in turnover in 2025, reflecting a continued recovery and expansion following the pandemic period (KPMG & Circana, 2025). Within this broader sector, the restaurant market alone was valued at around €29.8 billion in 2024, growing by 4.2%, with a more moderate growth forecast

of around 3.5% for 2025 (DBK Informa, 2025). This indicates a transition from rapid post-COVID recovery to a more stable growth phase. Notably, the segment of branded or organized restaurant chains has expanded significantly, accounting for 31.1% of the market and experiencing cumulative growth of 46.9% since 2019 (Alimarket, 2025a).

Despite this positive trajectory, the sector faces increasing cost and margin pressures. Since 2021, food input costs have risen by more than 30%, driven by inflation in energy, raw materials, and supply chains (Lexpress Franchise, 2026; INE, 2025). These increases have been partially passed on to consumers, as reflected in the rise of the average daily special to approximately €14.20. However, operators continue to face pressure on margins due to rising labor costs and competitive intensity, which limit pricing power and require improvements in operational efficiency.

At the same time, consumer behavior has undergone structural changes. The growing importance of delivery and takeaway channels, which now account for approximately 27% of total business, has reshaped demand patterns and required operators to adapt their formats and operations (KPMG & Circana, 2025). Consumers increasingly prioritize convenience, speed, and digital access, while also showing a rising interest in healthier and more diverse food options. These shifts have contributed to the emergence of more flexible formats and the gradual transformation of traditional casual dining concepts.

In parallel, the sector is experiencing a process of consolidation and digital transformation, particularly within branded restaurant chains. Organized operators continue to gain market share at the expense of independent establishments, benefiting from economies of scale, stronger brand recognition, and more advanced management capabilities. Digitalization has become a key competitive lever, with approximately 40% of branded chains already adopting generative artificial intelligence tools to improve operations, marketing, and customer experience (KPMG & Circana, 2025).

2.2.2. Key trends shaping the industry

Beyond the structural overview, four interconnected trends are actively reshaping the competitive environment in which VIPS operates.

The first is the rapid acceleration of digitalization. Spain is emerging as one of the most advanced markets in Europe in terms of technological readiness, with 43% of restaurant companies already prepared to adopt generative artificial intelligence, ahead of other major European markets (KPMG & Circana, 2025). More broadly, 74% of hospitality businesses are actively investing in technology, reflecting a clear shift from viewing digitalization as a cost to considering it a strategic investment (Lexpress Franchise, 2026).

The second is the rise of convenience-driven consumption. Delivery and takeaway channels now account for approximately 27% of total restaurant activity (KPMG & Circana, 2025). The Spanish delivery market reached around €8 billion in 2024 and is expected to grow to €9.13 billion in 2025 and €11 billion by 2027, confirming the structural nature of this trend (Statista, 2025). This evolution has been accompanied by the rise of dark kitchens, the expansion of quick-service formats, and the increasing relevance of solo dining occasions, pushing operators toward multichannel strategies that combine dine-in, takeaway, and delivery.

The third is the consolidation of organized chains. Since 2019, the branded segment has grown by 46.9%, compared to only 5.7% for independent operators, reaching a market share of 31.1% (Alimarket, 2025a). This trend is expected to continue, with 95% of branded groups planning new

openings for 2026 (KPMG & Circana, 2025), and franchising models accelerating expansion while maintaining operational consistency.

The fourth, and most disruptive for casual dining brands like VIPS, is the emergence of non-traditional competitors, particularly supermarkets. According to the Observatorio de la Restauración de Marca, 55% of restaurant operators already report direct competition from supermarkets (KPMG & Circana, 2025). Mercadona provides the most illustrative example: since the launch of its "Listo para Comer" concept in 2018, the company has rolled out the service across hundreds of stores, offering up to 35 freshly prepared dishes at highly competitive prices, typically between €3 and €5 (Directo al Paladar, 2025). These offerings directly target working consumers seeking affordable and convenient alternatives to eating out, complemented by in-store seating areas and microwaves that effectively position the supermarket as a hybrid foodservice operator. This transformation is being reinforced through the "Tienda 9" model, a €3.7 billion investment program aimed at redesigning more than 1,600 stores to function increasingly as ready-to-eat hubs (Ecosistema Startup, 2026). In this context, traditional restaurants face growing competition from a player with unmatched scale, logistics, and pricing power, with the ready-to-eat category growing by approximately 50% in the past three years (Profesional Horeca, 2024).

In parallel, consumer preferences are increasingly oriented toward healthier, more sustainable, and more diverse food options. Around 84% of branded chains are adapting their menus accordingly (KPMG & Circana, 2025), 66% of consumers are willing to pay a premium for sustainable brands, and 62% of restaurants have already taken steps to reduce plastic usage (Profesional Horeca, 2024). Younger generations are also driving demand for plant-based, vegan, and gluten-free options.

Finally, the sector continues to face cost and profitability pressures. Restaurant prices have risen by 4.3% year-on-year as of early 2026 (Lexpress Franchise, 2026), net margins remain below 7-8% (Hostelería Zunax, 2026), and talent management has emerged as a critical issue with high levels of absenteeism and staff turnover (KPMG & Circana, 2025). These pressures force operators to focus on efficiency, cost control, and workforce management as strategic priorities.

2.2.3. Competitive landscape

The Spanish restaurant sector is characterized by a dual structure in which a highly fragmented base of independent operators coexists with a rapidly expanding segment of organized and branded chains. Spain remains one of the most fragmented restaurant markets in Europe, with approximately 96% of companies classified as micro-businesses with fewer than 10 employees (CaixaBank Research, 2025). Despite their numerical dominance, these operators generate a relatively smaller share of economic value: larger chains account for approximately 17% of the sector's gross value added and 14% of total employment (CaixaBank Research, 2025).

The organized segment is increasingly dominated by a small number of large groups. Restaurant Brands Iberia, McDonald's, Alsea (the owner of VIPS), and Restalia form the core of this group, collectively generating more than €4.5 billion in revenue and operating over 3,630 establishments (El Independiente, 2024). Fast food remains the most dynamic sub-segment, accounting for more than 40% of new openings in 2024 (Alimarket, 2025b). Branded restaurants in Spain reached a market share of 31.1% in 2025, supported by revenues of €11.16 billion through August, representing a 5.1% year-on-year increase (El Economista, 2025). Despite this expansion, Spain still lags behind more mature European markets such as the United Kingdom and France in terms of chain penetration, suggesting that consolidation is likely to continue (Alimarket, 2025a).

Beyond the leading groups, the market includes second-tier and specialized operators such as AmRest (which reported revenues of €660.5 million in Q3 2025 (Restauración News, 2025a)), Food Delivery Brands, Comess Group, FoodBox, and emerging fast-casual players such as Goiko. The coffee shop segment has also become increasingly competitive, with established brands such as Starbucks, Santagloria, Panaria, and 365 Obrador competing alongside new international entrants (Alimarket, 2025c).

In addition to traditional competitors, the sector is increasingly influenced by non-restaurant players. Supermarkets, particularly Mercadona, are aggressively expanding into the ready-to-eat food category, directly targeting the same customer segments as mid-range casual dining brands (KPMG & Circana, 2025). Delivery platforms such as Glovo, Uber Eats, and Just Eat play a dual role as both distribution channels and intermediaries, shaping access to demand and influencing pricing dynamics. Finally, competition is highly concentrated geographically: Andalusia, Catalonia, the Valencian Community, and Madrid account for nearly 60% of all organized restaurant locations (Alimarket, 2025b), with approximately 30% of restaurant establishments depending heavily on tourism and around 10% on international visitors (CaixaBank Research, 2025).

2.3. The strategic challenge: VIPS SWOT

The previous subsections have presented the situation of VIPS as a client and the dynamics of the industry in which it competes. The following SWOT synthesizes both perspectives into a focused view of the strategic challenge that this consulting project must address. Unlike the sector-wide SWOT analyses common in industry reports, this assessment focuses specifically on VIPS, integrating the brand's internal characteristics with the external pressures of the Spanish casual dining landscape.

Strengths

VIPS benefits from a powerful set of brand-specific assets. After more than five decades of operation, it enjoys high brand recognition and cultural embedment, particularly in the Madrid region where 59% of its locations are concentrated (Pérez Ariza, 2026). Its store portfolio includes prime real estate in some of the most visible commercial corridors in Spain, such as Gran Vía, Puerta del Sol, and Calle de Alcalá. The integration into the Alsea portfolio since 2018 provides access to professional governance, international best practices, and the operational and financial backing of one of the largest multinational restaurant operators in Latin America and Europe (Expansión, 2018; Alsea, 2025b). In addition, VIPS operates in a market that, at the industry level, shows notable resilience: Spain is the only major European market that has not experienced a decline in foodservice traffic (KPMG & Circana, 2025), and the country leads Europe in technological readiness with 43% of restaurant companies prepared to adopt generative AI (KPMG & Circana, 2025).

Weaknesses

The most fundamental weakness of VIPS is its lack of differentiated positioning. The original all-day dining concept that defined the brand in 1969 has gradually lost its differentiating power as more focused competitors have captured each of the categories that VIPS historically served (premium burgers, breakfasts and brunch, casual lunch, family dining). The brand competes against specialized alternatives across multiple categories without being the clear leader in any of them. A second weakness is the extreme geographic concentration of the chain in Madrid (59%

of locations), which simplifies execution but limits national scale and exposes the brand to a single local market. A third weakness is the heterogeneous performance of the portfolio: not all 170 locations face the same competitive context, and the lack of a systematic evaluation framework limits the ability of the company to allocate investment efficiently. Finally, within the Alsea portfolio, VIPS has lost relative weight compared to brands with stronger international growth trajectories, and it overlaps in positioning with sister brands such as Foster's Hollywood, creating potential cannibalization and competing for internal capital allocation.

Opportunities

Several opportunities emerge from both the brand's situation and the industry environment. First, the consolidation of organized chains in Spain still has significant runway: branded restaurants represent only 31.1% of the market, compared to 67.2% in the UK and 57.1% in France (Alimarket, 2025a), suggesting room for established brands to capture share. Second, the off-premise channel offers a defensive opportunity: with delivery expected to reach €11 billion by 2027 (Statista, 2025), the strengthening of takeaway and delivery operations can offset pressure on physical traffic. Third, digitalization and AI adoption, where Spain leads Europe (KPMG & Circana, 2025; Lexpress Franchise, 2026), represent levers to improve operational efficiency, personalization, and customer experience at relatively low marginal cost. Fourth, the growing demand for healthier and more sustainable food offerings (KPMG & Circana, 2025; Profesional Horeca, 2024) is consistent with the brand narrative recently introduced through the "Plato Perfecto" daily-special offering (El Publicista, 2025), opening a possible path for the repositioning of the brand around quality, convenience, and healthy indulgence. Fifth, the heterogeneity of the VIPS portfolio, far from being only a weakness, also represents an opportunity: a systematic evaluation of the chain can identify high-potential locations where targeted interventions could unlock disproportionate value.

Threats

The most disruptive threat is the emergence of non-traditional competitors, particularly Mercadona, whose "Listo para Comer" service and €3.7 billion "Tienda 9" investment program are redefining the supermarket as a foodservice player (KPMG & Circana, 2025; Ecosistema Startup, 2026). With the ready-to-eat category growing approximately 50% in the past three years (Profesional Horeca, 2024), VIPS faces structural competition for the weekday lunch occasion from a player with unmatched scale and pricing power. Persistent cost inflation continues to erode margins, with food input costs rising by more than 30% since 2021 and restaurant prices increasing 4.3% year-on-year (Lexpress Franchise, 2026), in a context where consumer behavior is becoming more cautious. Within the casual dining segment, the fragmentation of consumer attention across focused concepts (premium burgers, brunch, fast-casual) makes it increasingly difficult for a generalist brand like VIPS to compete on differentiation. Finally, the regulatory environment and the growing intermediation power of delivery platforms add further pressure on margins and operational complexity.

The diagnosis outlined in this section makes clear that VIPS operates in a transforming industry while facing a brand-specific strategic challenge: a generalist positioning that has lost differentiating power, a heterogeneous chain that has not been systematically evaluated, and a portfolio role within Alsea that requires clarification. Addressing this challenge requires moving from generic assertions about the chain to a granular, evidence-based diagnosis of each individual restaurant. The next section presents the methodology designed to deliver precisely that diagnosis.

3. Methodology

This section describes the methodology applied to evaluate the 170 VIPS locations operating in Spain and to identify groups of restaurants with similar profiles. As anticipated in the diagnosis, the central challenge of the project requires moving from generic, chain-level assertions to a granular and evidence-based diagnosis of each individual restaurant. The methodology presented below is designed to deliver precisely that diagnosis under conditions of limited internal data availability, and to do so in a way that is both statistically rigorous and operationally interpretable for the client.

3.1. Methodological approach

The analytical approach combines three sequential elements. First, the systematic collection of publicly available data for each of the 170 VIPS restaurants in Spain, ensuring that the same set of attributes is recorded for every location in the chain and that the resulting dataset is fully comparable across restaurants. Second, the calculation of descriptive statistics for the numerical variables, in order to understand their distribution and behavior before proceeding with the multivariate analysis. This preliminary step is important because the variables included in the analysis differ substantially in their scales and in the nature of the information they capture, and a basic exploration of their properties supports a more informed interpretation of the clustering results. Third, the application of a two-step cluster analysis to identify homogeneous groups of restaurants within the chain, based on the combination of categorical and numerical attributes that characterize each location.

This three-step sequence reflects the logic typically followed in consulting engagements, which moves from data preparation to exploratory analysis and then to confirmatory or classification analysis (Rasiel, 1999). The choice of clustering, rather than a scoring or ranking approach, responds directly to the nature of the strategic challenge identified in the diagnosis: VIPS does not need a uniform optimization of all locations, but rather a differentiated treatment of restaurants that face different strategic situations. Clustering is the natural analytical technique to support such a differentiated approach, since it produces groups of restaurants that are internally homogeneous and externally distinct, and that can therefore be addressed through tailored strategic actions.

All statistical analyses have been performed in IBM SPSS Statistics, a widely used software package in academic and consulting environments, which provides a robust implementation of the two-step clustering algorithm and standard outputs for the assessment of cluster quality.

3.2. Data collection

The dataset comprises the full set of 170 VIPS restaurants operating in Spain at the time of the engagement, identified from the official VIPS store locator (Pérez Ariza, 2026). The decision to work with the complete population of restaurants, rather than with a sample, is consistent with the consulting purpose of the project: the deliverable is intended to support decisions at the individual restaurant level, which requires every location to be classified and not only a representative subset. For each restaurant, seven variables have been compiled from publicly available sources, combining locational, socioeconomic, and performance-related dimensions. The variables are described in Table 1 below.

Tabla 1. Variable included in the analysis

Variable	**Type**	**Description**	**Source**
Municipality	Categorical	Municipality in which the restaurant is located	VIPS official store locator (Pérez Ariza, 2026)
Population	Continuous	Number of inhabitants of the municipality	INE (2025)
Madrid city	Binary	1 if the restaurant is located in the city of Madrid, 0 otherwise	Derived from municipality
Mall	Binary	1 if the restaurant is located inside a shopping mall, 0 if it is street-level	Direct observation via Google Maps (Pérez Ariza, 2026)
Terrace	Binary	1 if the restaurant has an outdoor terrace, 0 otherwise	Google Maps (Pérez Ariza, 2026)
Gross income per person	Continuous	Average gross income per person at the local level (neighborhood for Madrid municipality locations, municipality for all other locations)	INE (2025)
Google rating	Continuous	Average Google Maps customer rating (0–5 scale)	Google Maps (Pérez Ariza, 2026)
Number of Google ratings	Continuous	Total number of customer reviews accumulated on Google Maps	Google Maps (Pérez Ariza, 2026)

The rationale behind the selection of these variables is to capture three dimensions that together characterize the strategic situation of each restaurant. The first dimension is location and market context, captured through the municipality, population, Madrid city, and mall variables. Together, these variables describe the type of market in which the restaurant operates (a large urban area, a medium-sized city, a tourist destination), the physical format of the location (street-level versus shopping mall), and the specific weight of Madrid as the dominant geography of the VIPS chain. The Madrid city binary, in particular, has been included as an independent variable because the diagnosis has shown that 59% of the chain is concentrated in the province of Madrid and that the strategic agenda of the brand is, in practice, primarily a Madrid agenda; isolating this dimension as a clustering input ensures that the algorithm explicitly considers the Madrid-specific dynamics of the chain.

The second dimension is socioeconomic environment, captured through the gross income per person variable. This variable approximates the purchasing power of the catchment area, which conditions both the potential ticket and the type of customer the restaurant can attract. In a casual dining segment increasingly fragmented by price-sensitive and experience-oriented alternatives, the socioeconomic profile of the surrounding area is a key determinant of which value proposition can succeed in each location. For the gross income variable, the level of granularity has been adapted to the data available: in Madrid city, where the INE publishes income data at the

neighborhood level through the *Atlas de Distribución de Renta de los Hogares*, the corresponding neighborhood income has been assigned to each restaurant, providing a more precise estimate of the immediate environment. For the rest of locations, the municipal average has been used. For restaurants located within shopping malls, the income of the neighborhood or municipality in which the mall is physically located has been assigned, on the basis that the surrounding catchment area still represents a relevant indicator of the socioeconomic profile of the customer base, even when access to the restaurant is mediated by the mall format.

The third dimension is observable performance. In the absence of internal sales or profitability data, the Google rating and the number of Google ratings have been used as the best publicly available proxies for, respectively, perceived service quality and accumulated customer volume. The Google rating, expressed on a 0–5 scale, summarizes the aggregate customer experience as reported by users who have visited the restaurant and chosen to leave a review. The number of ratings, in turn, reflects the cumulative visibility and customer traffic of the location over time: a restaurant with several thousand reviews has, on average, attracted more customers than one with a few hundred, and the difference is informative even when the absolute volumes are not perfectly comparable. While these proxies have known limitations (rating distributions are typically skewed toward positive values, and review counts depend on factors such as customer profile and digital engagement), they remain the most consistent and comparable indicators available across all 170 locations.

Finally, the terrace variable has been included as an operational differentiator that is particularly relevant in the Spanish hospitality context, where outdoor seating can represent a significant share of total capacity and revenue, especially in urban and tourist environments. Including this binary variable in the clustering allows the algorithm to capture whether the operational configuration of each restaurant is consistent with the broader characteristics of its location, which is informative for the subsequent strategic interpretation.

3.3. Descriptive analysis

Prior to the multivariate analysis, descriptive statistics have been calculated for the four numerical variables in the dataset: population, Google rating, number of Google ratings, and gross income per person. The objective of this step is twofold: first, to understand the distribution and behavior of each variable across the 170 locations, including measures of central tendency (mean), dispersion (standard deviation), and range (minimum and maximum values); second, to anticipate any pattern that may be relevant for the interpretation of the clustering results. For example, a very wide range or a high standard deviation in one of the variables would suggest that this dimension is contributing strongly to the differentiation between locations, and the clusters obtained later in the analysis are likely to reflect that variation. These descriptive statistics, together with their substantive interpretation, are presented at the beginning of Section 4 as the starting point of the analytical narrative.

3.4. Two-step cluster analysis

To identify homogeneous groups of restaurants within the VIPS chain, a two-step cluster analysis has been applied to the dataset. This technique has been chosen over alternative clustering methods such as k-means or hierarchical clustering for three substantive reasons.

First, two-step clustering is specifically designed to handle datasets that combine categorical and continuous variables, which is precisely the structure of the dataset used in this project: binary variables such as Madrid city, Mall, and Terrace coexist with continuous variables such as

population, gross income, Google rating, and number of Google ratings. Alternative methods such as k-means require all variables to be continuous and rely on Euclidean distance, which is not appropriate for categorical inputs; applying k-means to this dataset would either force an artificial transformation of the binary variables (for example, by treating them as continuous) or require their exclusion from the analysis, both of which would distort the results. The two-step algorithm, in contrast, uses a log-likelihood distance measure that handles both types of variables natively, treating continuous variables under a normal-distribution assumption and categorical variables under a multinomial-distribution assumption (Chiu et al., 2001).

Second, the two-step algorithm is scalable to large datasets and computationally efficient, as it operates in two passes. In the first pass, observations are pre-clustered through a Cluster Feature (CF) tree that summarizes the dataset into a manageable number of sub-clusters; in the second pass, these sub-clusters are merged through a hierarchical agglomerative procedure to obtain the final solution (IBM, 2021). This architecture makes the technique well-suited to portfolios of the size analyzed in this project, where the 170 restaurants are large enough to make exhaustive hierarchical clustering computationally intensive, but small enough to benefit from the additional refinement of a second pass.

Third, two-step clustering provides a built-in cluster quality assessment through the silhouette measure of cohesion and separation. This measure evaluates two complementary properties of the solution: cohesion, which captures how close the observations within each cluster are to one another, and separation, which captures how distant the observations of different clusters are from one another. The silhouette score combines both into a single value ranging from -1 to +1, with values above 0.5 generally considered indicators of good cluster quality, values between 0.2 and 0.5 indicating acceptable or fair quality, and values below 0.2 suggesting that the cluster structure is weak or potentially artificial (Kaufman & Rousseeuw, 1990). The availability of this objective quality criterion is particularly relevant in this consulting context, where the credibility of the strategic recommendations rests on the robustness of the underlying classification.

In the application of the technique, several iterations have been performed varying the number of clusters in order to identify the configuration that delivers the best balance between statistical quality and strategic interpretability. For each candidate solution, the silhouette measure has been examined, and the resulting cluster profiles have been reviewed to ensure that the groups produced were not only statistically distinct but also operationally meaningful — that is, that each cluster could be associated with a recognizable type of restaurant within the chain and translated into a differentiated set of strategic actions. A solution that maximizes the silhouette score but produces clusters that are difficult to interpret strategically would have limited value for the consulting purpose of the project; conversely, a solution that is operationally clear but statistically weak would compromise the credibility of the recommendations. The final configuration retained therefore represents the configuration that best reconciles both criteria. The number of clusters retained and the corresponding silhouette score are reported at the beginning of Section 4, together with the profile of each cluster.

3.5. From clustering to recommendations

The output of the two-step cluster analysis provides a classification of each of the 170 VIPS restaurants into one of the clusters identified. This classification constitutes the foundation of the subsequent strategic analysis: each cluster represents a group of restaurants that share a similar combination of location, socioeconomic context, and observable performance, and that therefore face a comparable strategic situation. By grouping restaurants in this way, the methodology

enables the formulation of differentiated strategic actions that are responsive to the specific profile of each group, rather than to the chain as a whole.

Section 4 presents the results of the analysis, including the descriptive statistics of the numerical variables, the profile of each cluster in terms of its dominant attributes, and a substantive interpretation of what each group represents within the VIPS chain. Section 5 translates these findings into a set of strategic recommendations differentiated by cluster, complemented by transversal recommendations that apply across the chain. Section 6 proposes an implementation roadmap that sequences the recommendations over the short, medium, and long term, including the resources committed to support each phase of the implementation.

4. Chain Analysis

This section presents the results of the analysis applied to the 170 VIPS restaurants in Spain. It is structured into five subsections that follow the logical sequence of the analytical process. Subsection 4.1 presents the descriptive statistics of the four numerical variables included in the dataset, providing a first overview of the distribution and behavior of each variable across the chain. Subsection 4.2 reports the results of an initial two-step cluster analysis based on five variables, excluding the Google rating. Subsection 4.3 examines whether cluster membership is associated with differences in Google rating through a linear regression. Subsection 4.4 presents the final cluster solution, obtained by incorporating the Google rating as an additional input variable. Subsection 4.5 closes the section by describing the profile of each of the four clusters identified, providing the analytical foundation on which the strategic recommendations of Section 5 are built.

4.1. Descriptive analysis

Table 2 reports the descriptive statistics of the four numerical variables included in the dataset: population, Google rating, number of Google ratings, and gross income per person. The statistics are calculated for all 170 restaurants in the chain.

Tabla 2. Descriptive statistics of the numerical variables (N = 170)

Variable	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. deviation
Population	3,485,020	14,980	3,500,000	1,492,831.04	1,580,227.146
Google rating	2.8	2.0	4.8	4.125	0.351
Number of Google ratings	15,682	18	15,700	3,622.39	2,853.017
Gross income per person	31,993	13,534	45,527	24,580.47	8,764.570

Several observations emerge from this table. The population variable shows the widest dispersion, with values ranging from 14,980 inhabitants (small municipalities hosting a single VIPS restaurant) to 3,500,000 inhabitants (the city of Madrid). The mean of approximately 1.49 million and the standard deviation of approximately 1.58 million confirm a highly heterogeneous distribution: many restaurants are located in mid-sized municipalities, while a substantial share is concentrated in large urban centers, particularly Madrid. This heterogeneity is consistent with the geographic concentration of the chain identified in the diagnosis.

The Google rating variable shows the opposite pattern, with limited dispersion across the chain. The mean is 4.125 on a 0–5 scale, with a standard deviation of only 0.351 and values ranging from 2.0 to 4.8. This indicates that the perceived service quality of VIPS restaurants is relatively homogeneous and consistently positive across locations, with no extreme negative outliers. The narrow range of variation suggests that the Google rating alone is unlikely to be a dominant differentiator between restaurants, but it remains informative when combined with other variables.

The number of Google ratings captures the cumulative visibility and review volume of each restaurant. The values range from 18 reviews (in locations with very limited digital engagement or recent openings) to 15,700 reviews (in the most visible and high-traffic restaurants), with a mean of 3,622 and a standard deviation of 2,853. The wide range and high standard deviation indicate that some restaurants accumulate exposure orders of magnitude higher than others, even within a chain of stable size and tenure.

Finally, the gross income per person variable ranges from €13,534 to €45,527, with a mean of €24,580 and a standard deviation of €8,765. This dispersion reflects the diversity of the socioeconomic environments in which VIPS restaurants operate, from working-class neighborhoods to high-income areas of Madrid such as Salamanca or Chamberí.

Taken together, these descriptive statistics confirm that the VIPS chain combines locations with very different characteristics in terms of market size, socioeconomic environment, and accumulated visibility, while sharing a relatively uniform level of perceived service quality. This heterogeneity provides the empirical foundation for the cluster analysis that follows.

4.2. First clustering: five-variable solution

A first two-step cluster analysis was conducted using five input variables: population, Madrid city, mall, terrace, and gross income per person. The Google rating was deliberately excluded from this initial solution in order to first identify groups based on location and market characteristics, and subsequently examine whether perceived service quality varied systematically across the groups identified.

Several iterations were performed varying the number of clusters in order to identify the configuration that delivered the best balance between statistical quality and operational interpretability. The optimal configuration retained is a four-cluster solution, which achieved a silhouette measure of cohesion and separation of approximately 0.6, falling in the "good" range of the indicator according to the standard interpretation of the silhouette score (Kaufman & Rousseeuw, 1990). This value indicates that the clusters obtained are both internally cohesive and well separated from one another.

The four clusters identified in this first solution are summarized in Table 3 below, with input variables ordered by predictor importance.

Tabla 3. First clustering solution — four-cluster configuration (five variables)

Cluster	Size	Population (mean)	Madrid city	Terrace	Mall	Gross income (mean)
1	65 (38.2%)	3,449,280	1 (100.0%)	1 (70.8%)	0 (70.8%)	€31,451
3	48 (28.2%)	266,506	0 (100.0%)	1 (100.0%)	1 (100.0%)	€20,676
2	32 (18.8%)	276,860	0 (100.0%)	0 (100.0%)	1 (59.4%)	€19,408
4	25 (14.7%)	317,050	0 (100.0%)	1 (100.0%)	0 (100.0%)	€20,835

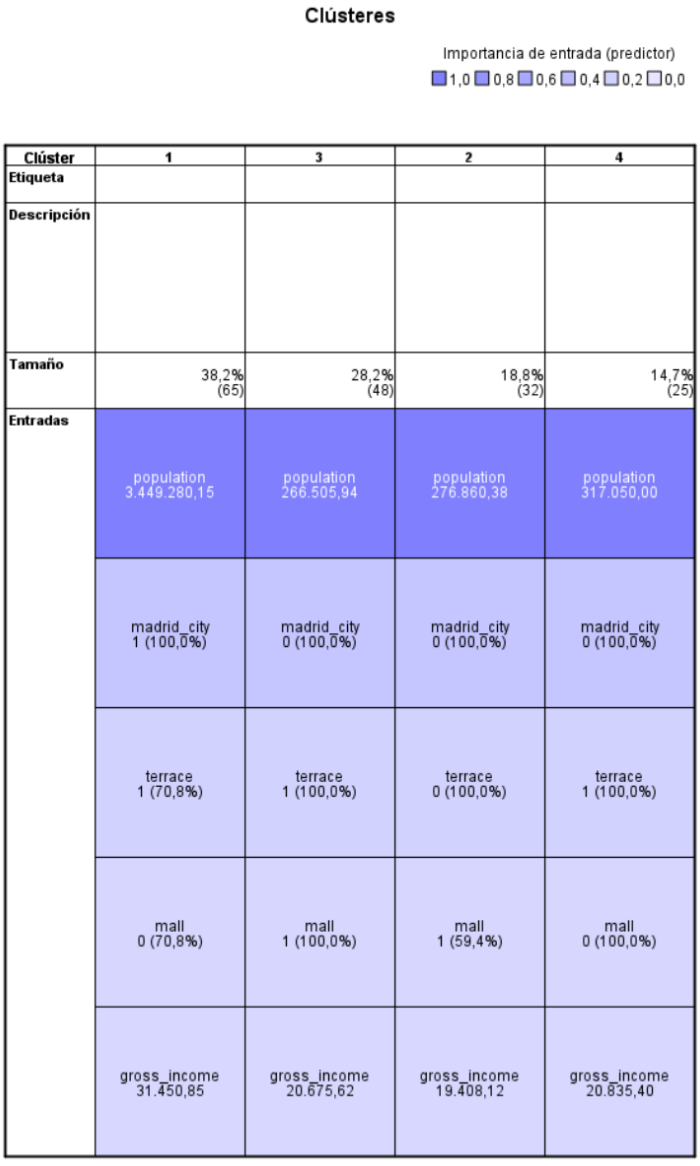

Ilustración 1. SPSS output – First clustering solution

The four clusters present markedly different profiles. Cluster 1 groups the 65 restaurants located in the city of Madrid, characterized by very high municipal population, mostly street-level locations with terrace, and the highest average gross income of all clusters. Cluster 3 contains 48 restaurants located outside Madrid city, all situated within shopping malls and with terrace, in municipalities of moderate size and average income. Cluster 2 groups 32 restaurants located outside Madrid city, the majority of them inside shopping malls but without terrace, with the lowest average gross income of the four groups. Finally, Cluster 4 contains 25 restaurants outside Madrid city, all of them street-level locations with terrace, in municipalities of intermediate size and moderate income.

The first clustering therefore identifies a clear primary segmentation of the chain by city of Madrid versus rest of Spain, with the non-Madrid restaurants further differentiated by format (mall versus street) and by the presence of a terrace.

4.3. Relationship between cluster membership and Google rating

After obtaining the first cluster solution, a **linear regression** was conducted to test whether cluster membership is statistically associated with differences in Google rating across restaurants. The objective of this analysis was to determine whether the four groups identified in the first clustering, defined exclusively on the basis of location and market characteristics, also exhibited differences in perceived service quality.

The dependent variable was the Google rating of each restaurant, and the independent variable was the cluster assignment from the first solution (cluster number 1 to 4). The results of the regression are reported in Table 4.

Tabla 4. Linear regression — Google rating as a function of cluster membership

Indicator	**Value**
R	0.066
R^2	0.004
Adjusted R^2	-0.002
Standard error of the estimate	0.351
Unstandardized coefficient (Cluster)	-0.021
Standard error	0.024
Standardized coefficient (Beta)	-0.066
t	-0.855
Significance (p-value)	0.394

The results show that the relationship between cluster membership and Google rating is not statistically significant ($p = 0.394$, well above the conventional threshold of 0.05). The R^2 of 0.004 indicates that cluster membership explains less than 1% of the variance in Google rating across restaurants, and the adjusted R^2 is negative, confirming that the model does not provide any meaningful explanatory power.

This finding is informative for two reasons. First, it confirms the observation from the descriptive statistics that Google rating is relatively homogeneous across the chain, with most restaurants concentrated within a narrow range around the mean of 4.125. Second, it implies that the four clusters identified in the first solution, which differentiate restaurants by location and market characteristics, do not capture differences in perceived service quality. From a methodological standpoint, this result suggests that the Google rating provides additional information that is not redundant with the other variables, and that incorporating it as an additional input in the clustering may further refine the segmentation of the chain.

4.4. Final clustering: six-variable solution

On the basis of the previous finding, a second two-step cluster analysis was conducted, incorporating the Google rating as a sixth input variable alongside the five variables used in the first solution. The objective was to obtain a final segmentation of the chain that integrated both location-market characteristics and perceived service quality.

As in the first analysis, several iterations were performed varying the number of clusters. The final configuration retained is again a four-cluster solution, which also achieved a silhouette measure of cohesion and separation of approximately 0.6, falling in the "good" range of the indicator. The results of the final clustering are summarized in Table 5, with input variables ordered by predictor importance.

Tabla 5. Final clustering solution — four-cluster configuration (six variables)

Cluster	Size	Population (mean)	Madrid city	Terrace	Mall	Gross income (mean)	Google rating (mean)
1	65 (38.2%)	3,449,280	1 (100.0%)	1 (70.8%)	0 (70.8%)	€31,451	4.15
3	48 (28.2%)	266,506	0 (100.0%)	1 (100.0%)	1 (100.0%)	€20,676	4.13
2	32 (18.8%)	276,860	0 (100.0%)	0 (100.0%)	1 (59.4%)	€19,408	4.10
4	25 (14.7%)	317,050	0 (100.0%)	1 (100.0%)	0 (100.0%)	€20,835	4.07

Clúster	1	3	2	4
Etiqueta				
Descripción				
Tamaño	38,2% (65)	28,2% (48)	18,8% (32)	14,7% (25)
Entradas	population 3.449.280,15	population 266.505,94	population 276.860,38	population 317.050,00
	madrid_city 1 (100,0%)	madrid_city 0 (100,0%)	madrid_city 0 (100,0%)	madrid_city 0 (100,0%)
	terrace 1 (70,8%)	terrace 1 (100,0%)	terrace 0 (100,0%)	terrace 1 (100,0%)
	mall 0 (70,8%)	mall 1 (100,0%)	mall 1 (59,4%)	mall 0 (100,0%)
	gross_income 31.450,85	gross_income 20.675,62	gross_income 19.408,12	gross_income 20.835,40
	ratings_google 4,15	ratings_google 4,13	ratings_google 4,10	ratings_google 4,07

Ilustración 2. SPSS output – Second clustering solution

The structural composition of the four clusters in the final solution is consistent with the first clustering: the size of each group and the dominant profile across location and market variables remain stable. The incorporation of the Google rating reveals that, while the four clusters share a similar average level of perceived service quality, a small but consistent gradient emerges, with Cluster 1 (Madrid city) showing the highest mean rating (4.15) and Cluster 4 (street-level locations outside Madrid) the lowest (4.07). Although the absolute differences are modest, the ordering of the clusters by Google rating is informative because it suggests that the location and market characteristics captured by the first five variables do contain some embedded relationship with perceived service quality, even if not strong enough to produce a statistically significant association in isolation.

4.5. Profile of each cluster

The final clustering identifies four distinct groups of VIPS restaurants in Spain, each with a recognizable profile in terms of location, format, socioeconomic environment, and perceived service quality. The characterization below summarizes the dominant attributes of each cluster as the foundation for the strategic recommendations developed in Section 5.

Cluster 1 — Madrid city, prime urban portfolio (65 restaurants, 38.2% of the chain)

This is the largest cluster and groups all the restaurants located in the city of Madrid. The average municipal population is approximately 3.45 million inhabitants, by far the highest of the four clusters and reflecting the size of the Madrid market. The vast majority of these restaurants (70.8%) are street-level locations rather than situated within shopping malls, and a similar proportion (70.8%) have an outdoor terrace. The average gross income per person of the surrounding area is €31,451, the highest of all clusters and substantially above the chain mean. The average Google rating is 4.15, also the highest of the four groups. This cluster represents the historical core of the VIPS chain: a large concentration of street-level restaurants operating in the highest-income areas of the country, with consistently positive perceived service quality.

Cluster 3 — Mall restaurants outside Madrid, with terrace (48 restaurants, 28.2% of the chain)

This cluster contains restaurants located outside the city of Madrid, all of them situated within shopping malls and all of them featuring an outdoor terrace. The average municipal population is approximately 266,500 inhabitants, characteristic of medium-sized Spanish cities, and the average gross income per person is €20,676, close to the chain mean. The average Google rating is 4.13, very close to the rating of the Madrid cluster. This group represents the mall-format segment of the chain operating outside the Madrid market, in medium-density urban environments with moderate income levels.

Cluster 2 — Mall restaurants outside Madrid, without terrace (32 restaurants, 18.8% of the chain)

This cluster also groups restaurants located outside Madrid city in medium-sized municipalities (average population approximately 276,900), but with two distinguishing features. None of these restaurants have an outdoor terrace, and 59.4% of them are located within shopping malls (while the remaining share corresponds to street locations also without terrace). The average gross income per person is €19,408, the lowest of the four clusters, and the average Google rating is 4.10. This group represents a more operationally constrained segment of the chain, located in areas of lower purchasing power and with fewer differentiating physical assets.

Cluster 4 — Street restaurants outside Madrid, with terrace (25 restaurants, 14.7% of the chain)

This is the smallest cluster and groups street-level restaurants located outside the city of Madrid, all of them featuring an outdoor terrace. The average municipal population is approximately 317,050 inhabitants, slightly higher than in clusters 2 and 3, and the average gross income per person is €20,835, similar to that of cluster 3. The average Google rating is 4.07, the lowest of the four clusters, though still well above the midpoint of the rating scale. This group represents the smallest and most heterogeneous segment of the chain in geographic terms, with restaurants distributed across regional capitals and tourist destinations of varying profile.

The four clusters identified provide a structured segmentation of the VIPS chain that captures both the location-market characteristics of each restaurant and its observable performance through the Google rating. The strategic recommendations developed in Section 5 build on this segmentation to propose differentiated actions for each group.

5. Strategic Recommendations

This section translates the findings of the analysis into a structured set of strategic recommendations. The previous section presented the descriptive statistics of the chain and the results of the two-step cluster analysis, which identified four groups of restaurants with distinct profiles. The recommendations developed here build on those results and are organized around three logical layers: a reading of the most relevant insights emerging from the analysis, a set of differentiated recommendations for each of the four clusters identified, and a series of transversal recommendations that apply across the entire chain.

5.1. From data to recommendations: reading the analysis strategically

Before formulating specific recommendations, it is useful to highlight three observations from the analysis that shape the strategic interpretation of the results.The first observation concerns the narrow range of the Google rating across the chain. The descriptive statistics show that the rating variable spans from 2.0 to 4.8, but the standard deviation is only 0.351 and the four cluster means fall within a remarkably tight band between 4.07 and 4.15. In other consumer-facing sectors, a difference of 0.08 points in customer rating might appear negligible. In the restaurant industry, however, this is not the case. Online rating algorithms used by platforms such as Google Maps, TripAdvisor, and delivery aggregators apply non-linear weighting around the 4.0 threshold: restaurants below 4.0 lose visibility in search results and recommendations, while those above 4.3 gain disproportionate exposure (Kaufman & Rousseeuw, 1990, in a different methodological context, also note that small differences within narrow ranges should not be confused with the absence of meaningful variation). In practical terms, a movement of one tenth of a point in the average rating of a restaurant can translate into measurable changes in visibility, walk-in traffic, and digital conversion. The implication is that the modest differences in rating observed between clusters are strategically meaningful, even if they appear statistically modest, and small targeted interventions on perceived service quality can deliver disproportionate returns.The second observation concerns the superior performance of the Madrid cluster. Cluster 1 groups 65 restaurants (38.2% of the chain) and exhibits the highest average rating (4.15), the highest gross income of the surrounding area (€31,451), and by far the largest market in terms of population. The combination of these characteristics suggests the presence of network effects and operational density advantages specific to Madrid: a concentration of 65 restaurants in a single metropolitan area allows for more efficient logistics, more consistent staff training, more sophisticated marketing campaigns at the local level, and stronger brand recognition reinforced by repeated exposure. These advantages are difficult to replicate in markets where the brand operates with a handful of dispersed locations.The third observation concerns the performance pattern outside Madrid. Cluster 3, which groups mall restaurants with terrace in medium-sized cities, achieves an average rating of 4.13 — very close to the Madrid cluster — while Cluster 4, which groups street-level restaurants outside Madrid, exhibits the lowest average rating of all four groups (4.07). This contrast suggests that, outside Madrid, success is more closely associated with the captive environments of shopping malls than with street-level locations in dispersed cities. This has direct implications for the geographic expansion strategy of the brand, as developed below.

5.2. Recommendations by cluster

Cluster 1 — Madrid city, prime urban portfolio (65 restaurants).

This cluster represents the historical core of the chain and benefits from the network effects identified above. The strategic priority is to **protect this position and use it as the laboratory of the brand**. Operational investments should focus on maintaining and elevating the customer experience: interior refurbishment cycles, staff training, service quality monitoring, and digital integration (mobile ordering, loyalty programs, contactless payment) should be deployed first in this cluster, where the stability of the demand environment allows the impact of innovations to be isolated and measured.

More importantly, given the concentration of high-income areas in this cluster, VIPS should **launch a premium flagship variant of the brand in one of its most visible Madrid locations**, such as Gran Vía, Puerta del Sol, or Calle de Alcalá. This flagship would not replace the standard VIPS format but extend it: a more curated menu, elevated interior design, a stronger emphasis on healthy and signature dishes building on the "Plato Perfecto" narrative, and a higher price point reflecting the premium positioning. The objective of this flagship is twofold. First, it would directly target the high-income customer segment captured by Cluster 1 (€31,451 average gross income), which is currently underexploited by the standard format. Second, and equally important, it would project an image of modernity and sophistication onto the broader brand, addressing the diagnostic finding that VIPS has lost differentiated positioning over time. A successful flagship in Madrid would generate brand-level uplift that extends far beyond the individual location, supporting brand perception across all 170 restaurants in the chain.

Cluster 3 — Mall restaurants outside Madrid, with terrace (48 restaurants).

This cluster performs well in terms of rating (4.13) and represents the strongest segment outside Madrid. The strategy here is **preservation and selective reinforcement**. Investments should focus on protecting the captive family audience that characterizes mall environments and on maintaining the operational consistency that produces the high rating. The terrace, present in 100% of these locations, is a clear differentiator and should be actively leveraged in marketing and customer experience design (seasonal terrace events, outdoor seating optimization, weather-dependent promotions). Given the cluster's stability, it can also serve as the secondary testing ground for innovations after they have been validated in Cluster 1.

Cluster 2 — Mall restaurants outside Madrid, without terrace (32 restaurants).

This cluster combines the lowest gross income (€19,408) and the absence of a terrace, two factors that limit both the value proposition and the operational flexibility of the restaurants. The strategic priority for this group is **differentiated value and competitive defense**. Two specific actions are recommended. First, where physical conditions allow, **evaluate the installation or expansion of an outdoor terrace**. The comparison with Cluster 3 suggests that this single operational change could improve customer experience and aggregate rating. Second, this cluster is the most exposed to competition from supermarket ready-to-eat offerings such as Mercadona's "Listo para Comer", precisely because it operates in lower-income environments where price sensitivity is highest. VIPS should consider **geographically differentiated pricing for the "Plato Perfecto" daily special** in these locations: a price point closer to the Spanish daily-special average of €14.20, rather than the standard €15.95, would defend share against ready-to-eat alternatives without compromising the premium positioning of the offering in higher-income clusters.

Cluster 4 — Street restaurants outside Madrid, with terrace (25 restaurants).

This cluster exhibits the lowest average rating (4.07) and the smallest size of the four groups. It also operates outside the two structural advantages of the chain: it lacks the network density of Madrid and the captive audience of shopping malls. The strategic priority for this cluster is **case-by-case evaluation**. Each of the 25 restaurants should be individually assessed to determine which of three paths best fits its situation: targeted reinforcement (if the local market shows potential and the location can be elevated to a Cluster 3 profile through investment), banner conversion (if the location would perform better under a different Alsea brand such as Foster's Hollywood, Ginos, or La Tagliatella), or exit (if neither path can deliver acceptable returns). This is the cluster where the most aggressive portfolio decisions are likely to be concentrated, and where the link with Alsea's broader brand portfolio becomes most operationally relevant.

5.3. Transversal recommendations

Beyond the cluster-specific actions, three transversal recommendations apply across the chain.

The first is to address the geographic concentration risk through focused regional expansion. Rather than dispersing new openings across multiple Spanish cities with limited presence in each, VIPS should concentrate any expansion effort on a single secondary city — most likely Barcelona, Valencia, or Seville — and build the same density of operations there as currently exists in Madrid. The analysis suggests that the rating advantage of Madrid is at least partly attributable to network effects and operational density. Replicating this density in a second metropolitan area would not only reduce the strategic dependence on Madrid (which currently concentrates 38.2% of the chain) but would also create a second hub capable of generating its own brand momentum. This focused approach contrasts with the current pattern of dispersed presence outside Madrid, where the brand lacks critical mass in any single secondary market.

The second is to upgrade perceived service quality across the chain through targeted operational interventions. Given the non-linear weighting of online ratings around the 4.0 and 4.3 thresholds, even modest improvements in customer experience can deliver disproportionate gains in visibility. Specific levers include staff training programs focused on service consistency, response protocols for negative online reviews, and the introduction of customer feedback systems integrated with the loyalty program. The objective is not to move the entire chain to an average of 4.5, but to push individual restaurants currently below 4.0 into the 4.0–4.3 band, where the visibility benefits are highest, and to identify a subset of high-performing locations (particularly within Clusters 1 and 3) that can be elevated to 4.5 or above as brand showcases.

The third is to clarify the position of VIPS within the Alsea portfolio. As anticipated in the diagnosis, VIPS overlaps in positioning with sister brands such as Foster's Hollywood, creating cannibalization risks and competing for internal capital allocation. The cluster analysis provides an empirical basis for this clarification: the premium flagship initiative in Cluster 1, the targeted competitive pricing in Cluster 2, and the case-by-case evaluation of Cluster 4 (which may involve banner conversion to other Alsea brands) all imply specific decisions about where VIPS plays and where other brands of the portfolio play. A coordinated portfolio review with Alsea is recommended as a precondition for the most consequential recommendations of this section.

5.4. Strategic logic and connection with implementation

The recommendations developed in this section follow a coherent strategic logic. The premium flagship in Cluster 1 is the centerpiece initiative: it addresses the most acute weakness identified

in the diagnosis (the loss of differentiated positioning), it leverages the highest-rated and highest-income cluster of the chain, and it generates brand-level uplift that supports the rest of the recommendations. The cluster-specific actions for Clusters 2, 3, and 4 protect and refine the existing portfolio, addressing competitive pressure where it is most acute (Cluster 2 versus supermarket alternatives) and concentrating the most aggressive portfolio decisions where the data signals the weakest fit (Cluster 4). The transversal recommendations close the loop by addressing the structural risks of the chain, geographic concentration, online visibility, and portfolio overlap with Alsea, that cannot be tackled at the level of any single cluster.

The implementation of these recommendations is not feasible simultaneously, both for reasons of capital allocation and because some initiatives require the prior validation of others (the premium flagship, for example, should generate learnings before any broader rollout of premium elements across the chain). The next section presents an implementation roadmap that sequences the recommendations over the short, medium, and long term, identifying the resources and dependencies associated with each phase.

6. Implementation Roadmap

The recommendations developed in the previous section define what VIPS should do; this section addresses how and when those actions should be deployed. The roadmap proposed below sequences the initiatives across three time horizons (short, medium, and long term) and identifies the resources and dependencies associated with each phase. The logic of the sequencing is twofold: initiatives with the highest strategic visibility and the lowest implementation complexity are prioritized in the short term to build momentum, while more capital-intensive or chain-wide interventions are scheduled in the medium and long term, once the early initiatives have generated learnings and freed up the necessary capacity.

6.1. Short term (0–12 months)

The short-term horizon concentrates on three initiatives that lay the strategic foundation for the rest of the roadmap.

The first and most visible initiative is the launch of the premium VIPS flagship in Madrid, recommended in Section 5.2 for Cluster 1. This flagship should be deployed in a single high-visibility location within the Madrid prime corridors, with a defined investment in interior redesign, menu development, and staff training. The pilot should run for a minimum of six months with clearly defined success metrics — incremental traffic, average ticket, customer satisfaction scores, and brand perception indicators measured through pre- and post-launch surveys. Estimated resources include capital expenditure for the renovation of the chosen location, a dedicated project team within VIPS combining operations, marketing, and brand management, and the involvement of Alsea corporate to ensure portfolio alignment.

The second short-term initiative is the coordinated portfolio review with Alsea, identified as a transversal recommendation in Section 5.3. This review should examine the brand adjacency between VIPS and sister brands such as Foster's Hollywood, Ginos, and La Tagliatella, particularly in shopping malls where multiple brands of the group coexist. The output of this review is a brand-by-brand positioning map that informs subsequent decisions about banner conversions in Cluster 4 and pricing differentiation in Cluster 2. The resources required are primarily managerial time, both within VIPS and at Alsea Europe level, and the involvement of an external consulting partner if internal capacity is constrained.

The third short-term initiative is the deployment of the online rating improvement program across the chain. This includes the rollout of standardized staff training modules focused on service consistency, the implementation of structured response protocols for online reviews, and the introduction of an integrated customer feedback system. The objective during this phase is to move every restaurant currently below the 4.0 rating threshold into the 4.0–4.3 band, where visibility gains are most pronounced. Resources include investment in training, the activation of a customer experience function at chain level, and the integration of feedback tools with the existing loyalty program.

6.2. Medium term (12–24 months)

The medium-term horizon focuses on the scaling of validated initiatives and the execution of the most capital-intensive cluster-specific actions.

The first medium-term initiative is the evaluation and scaling of the premium flagship concept. Based on the results of the Madrid pilot, VIPS should decide whether to replicate the flagship format in a second prime location in Madrid (consolidating the premium positioning in the core market) and whether to introduce selected premium elements into the standard format across Cluster 1. This decision should be evidence-based, supported by the metrics collected during the pilot phase.

The second medium-term initiative is the rollout of the cluster-specific operational improvements in Clusters 2 and 3. For Cluster 3, this includes the reinforcement of the terrace as a differentiator through seasonal events and outdoor seating optimization. For Cluster 2, it involves the evaluation and implementation of terrace installation where physically feasible, the deployment of geographically differentiated pricing for the "Plato Perfecto" daily-special offering, and the strengthening of competitive defense against ready-to-eat alternatives. These interventions are operational rather than structural and can be executed in parallel across the affected locations, with resource requirements concentrated in capital expenditure for terrace installations and in the local marketing budget to communicate the value proposition.

The third medium-term initiative is the case-by-case resolution of Cluster 4. Following the portfolio review conducted in the short term, each of the 25 restaurants in this cluster should be assigned to one of three paths: reinforcement, banner conversion to another Alsea brand, or exit. The execution of these decisions should be sequenced according to lease expiry dates and local market conditions, and should be coordinated with the broader Alsea portfolio to minimize transition costs. This phase is operationally complex but limited in scale (25 restaurants out of 170), and its successful execution removes the weakest segment from the chain while reinforcing the coherence of the remaining portfolio.

6.3. Long term (24+ months)

The long-term horizon addresses the structural transformation of the chain.

The central long-term initiative is the focused regional expansion into a second Spanish metropolitan area, building on the rationale developed in Section 5.3. Once the brand position has been clarified, the premium flagship has been validated, and the operational baseline of the chain has been upgraded, VIPS is in a position to deploy a concentrated expansion plan in a second city, replicating the network density that drives the performance of the Madrid cluster. The selection of the target city should be informed by market analysis (population, income, competitive intensity, real estate availability) and by the operational implications for Alsea's broader logistics

and supply chain. The expansion should be planned with a minimum critical mass of locations in the new market (rather than dispersed openings) to generate the network effects observed in Madrid.

The long-term phase also includes the consolidation of the brand positioning across the chain, drawing on the learnings of the premium flagship and the operational improvements implemented in the previous phases. By the end of this horizon, the VIPS chain should present a coherent and clearly differentiated value proposition across all clusters, with the premium variant operating in selected high-visibility locations, the standard format modernized across Madrid and the secondary hub, and the portfolio cleansed of the structural mismatches identified in Cluster 4.

6.4. Governance and continuous monitoring

Across the three horizons, the roadmap should be supported by a governance structure that ensures coordination between VIPS and Alsea and that enables continuous monitoring of progress. A steering committee involving the leadership of VIPS, Alsea Europe, and the relevant functional areas (operations, marketing, real estate, finance) should meet on a quarterly basis to review the status of each initiative, validate the metrics collected, and approve adjustments to the plan. The cluster classification developed in this consulting project should be revisited periodically — at minimum on an annual basis — to track how the strategic situation of each restaurant evolves as the recommendations are implemented and as the competitive environment continues to transform.

The next section summarizes the main conclusions of the project, including the contribution of the methodology, its limitations, and the avenues for future work.

7. Conclusions

This consulting project set out to address a specific strategic challenge: how the VIPS restaurant chain in Spain can be optimized through a systematic evaluation of its 170 individual locations, in a context where the brand operates with a heterogeneous portfolio, faces growing competitive pressure from focused alternatives and non-traditional players such as supermarket ready-to-eat offerings, and competes for capital allocation within the Alsea portfolio against sister brands with overlapping positioning.

To address this challenge, the project followed a structured methodology grounded in publicly available data. After diagnosing the situation of the client and the dynamics of the Spanish restaurant industry, the consulting work compiled a dataset of seven variables for each of the 170 VIPS restaurants, combining locational, socioeconomic, operational, and performance-related dimensions. A two-step cluster analysis, conducted in IBM SPSS Statistics, identified four homogeneous groups of restaurants within the chain: a large Madrid-centric cluster representing the historical core of the brand, two clusters of mall-based locations in medium-sized cities differentiated by the presence of a terrace, and a smaller cluster of street-level restaurants outside Madrid. The classification, validated through a silhouette measure of cohesion and separation in the "good" range, captures both the location-market characteristics of each restaurant and the differences in perceived service quality observed across the chain.

The strategic recommendations developed on the basis of this analysis follow a coherent logic. At the level of the Madrid cluster, the project recommends the launch of a premium flagship variant that addresses the most acute weakness identified in the diagnosis — the loss of differentiated positioning — and generates brand-level uplift that supports the rest of the chain.

At the level of the mall-based clusters, the recommendations protect the strongest segment of the network (Cluster 3) and reinforce the competitive defense of the most exposed segment (Cluster 2) through targeted operational and pricing interventions. At the level of the smallest cluster of street locations outside Madrid (Cluster 4), the project recommends a case-by-case evaluation that may include reinforcement, banner conversion to other Alsea brands, or selective exit. Three transversal recommendations complete the strategic agenda: a focused regional expansion into a second Spanish metropolitan area to reduce the dependency on Madrid, a chain-wide upgrade of perceived service quality leveraging the non-linear effects of online ratings, and a coordinated portfolio review with Alsea to clarify the position of VIPS within the broader group of brands.

Beyond the specific case of VIPS, this project contributes a replicable methodology that can be applied to other restaurant chains facing similar challenges in adapting their portfolios to evolving market conditions. The use of publicly available data and the application of two-step clustering allow the evaluation of large portfolios in the absence of internal performance information, offering a structured framework that complements rather than replaces the proprietary analyses that operators can conduct internally.

The project is subject to several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the absence of internal performance data such as store-level revenue or profitability means that the analysis relies on proxies, in particular the Google rating and the number of Google reviews, which capture observable aspects of customer experience but not the underlying economics of each restaurant. Second, the clustering reflects the situation of the chain at a specific point in time and should be re-applied periodically as the competitive environment and the network of restaurants evolve. Third, the strategic recommendations have been formulated at the level of clusters and at the level of the chain as a whole; their concrete implementation will require an additional layer of restaurant-by-restaurant analysis that combines the cluster classification with on-the-ground operational knowledge held by the client.

These limitations also define the most natural avenues for future work. The integration of internal performance data with the cluster classification would substantially strengthen the discriminatory power of the framework and enable a more precise assessment of the economic implications of each recommendation. The extension of the analysis to other brands within the Alsea portfolio, particularly Foster's Hollywood and Ginos, would provide a portfolio-level perspective that supports more informed capital allocation decisions across the group. Finally, the longitudinal application of the framework, tracking how the classification of each restaurant evolves as the recommendations are implemented, would transform a one-off diagnostic into a continuous management discipline. In a sector characterized by structural transformation and intensifying competitive pressure, the ability to systematically evaluate and adapt the chain is itself a strategic capability — and the framework developed in this project offers a concrete tool to support that capability in the case of VIPS and, more broadly, in any restaurant chain facing comparable challenges.

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