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# Awareness and Perceptions of the Official 5-Star Grading System in South Africa Among Key Stakeholders, Especially Accommodation Users

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**Abstract**

This study addresses a gap in knowledge about official accommodation grading by examining awareness and perceptions among stakeholders, especially accommodation users, of South Africa's TGCSA's official accommodation grading system. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, including a desktop component, quantitative structured surveys with 500 accommodation users and 10 purposively selected qualitative key informant interviews. The findings reveal that awareness levels of the TGCSA grading system are generally high among the stakeholders, including accommodation users. The grading system is also perceived to have value. Furthermore, demographic variables (especially age, gender, employment status and educational level) of accommodation users influence awareness and perceptions of the TGCSA grading system. Most of the key informants also recognised the value of having an official grading system although some expressed concerns in relation to relevance, frequency of assessments and costs. Key recommendations emanating from this study are raising awareness and improved communication of the TGSCA grading system among accommodation users and establishments, the integration of online reviews and revising the need for annual assessments (once every 3 years for renewals is suggested). The findings denote important insights to strengthen the utility value, credibility, uptake and relevance of the TGCSA accommodation grading system in South Africa.

**Keywords** Accommodation establishments; 5-Star grading system; TGCSA; accommodation users; South Africa

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## Introduction

Official accommodation Star grading systems exist in many countries worldwide, intended to classify tourism accommodation establishments based on physical and qualitative criteria. In South Africa, the Tourism Grading Council of South Africa (TGCSA) provides standardised ratings on a 5-Star scale for accommodation establishments. The tourism landscape, specifically aspects that users consider when making decisions on accommodation establishments, has changed substantially, shaped by variations in consumption preferences and patterns (including the popularity of Airbnb) and the way in which accommodation users assess the quality of an establishment with an increase in reviews on online platforms such as TripAdvisor that is timely and not dependent on independent assessors but rather the experiences of other users. It is, therefore, imperative to examine user perceptions of the official grading system to assess its relevance and whether it effectively serves the diverse needs of accommodation consumers and tourism accommodation establishments. Thus, this study investigates accommodation users' awareness and perceptions of TGCSA's official accommodation rating system in South Africa, which was intended to serve as a benchmark to assess, categorise and communicate quality standards of tourism accommodation establishments. Martin-Fuentes (2016) and Messias et al. (2024) assert that official and independent ratings of accommodation establishments provide standardised assessments that provide consistent and credible information to users and other stakeholders. However, the emergence, proliferation, and extensive use of digital platforms such as Booking.com, TripAdvisor, and Google Reviews (and social media generally, where users share their views and experiences) have resulted in new forms of consumer-generated evaluations/ 'ratings' that are increasingly shaping user perceptions and accommodation decisions. In terms of the gaps in research, limited studies (as will be elaborated in the literature review in the next section) undertake empirically-based research that utilise a mixed-methods approach that draws on surveys with accommodation users (permitting generalisations and trend analyses) and key informant interviews with main stakeholders, to provide insights and more detailed information. This is the methodological approach adopted in this study. Furthermore, there is an increasing focus on online/ guest reviews, which are playing a more prominent role in influencing accommodation user perceptions and decisions, requiring a reconsideration of the relevance of traditional, assessor-based grading systems. Additionally, most studies on accommodation grading tend to focus on accommodation perceptions/ experiences, and often concentrate on specific types of accommodation (mainly hotels) or specific regions or destinations within a country. Thus, this research contributes to knowledge on official grading systems by undertaking a country-level assessment that focuses on user perceptions of the grading system currently used in South Africa.

Since accommodation users are the target of investments in grading, their perceptions and experiences are likely to influence whether establishments participate in being TGCSA graded. Yet, very few studies focus on this stakeholder. This gap in research is specifically relevant in South Africa, where the TGCSA formal grading system is viewed to be an important mechanism to maintain quality standards, build trust and credibility, and promote competitiveness domestically and internationally

in the tourism sector, especially accommodation establishments that the current grading system primarily focuses on. Understanding consumers' and other stakeholders' awareness and perceptions of the grading system provides valuable insights into the effectiveness and relevance of independent assessor-based grading systems. The findings could assist accommodation establishments in making informed choices regarding participation in the grading programme and understanding changes in consumer preferences and behaviours, guide tourism authorities and bodies to make policy and strategic decisions (especially government support of grading initiatives), and inform the integration of traditional grading systems with online reviews to increase consumer confidence and respond to review preferences, as advocated by Kovács (2025) and Messias et al. (2024). This study, drawing on primary data collection, therefore, examines accommodation users' (including domestic and international travellers as well as staycations) awareness and perceptions of South Africa's TGCSA official 5-Star grading system. The next section undertakes a brief literature review of pertinent themes in relation to the topic, contextualising the study and highlighting the gaps in the research that this study addresses. This is followed by an overview of the methodological approach adopted for the primary data collection. Thereafter, the results are presented and discussed. Finally, overall concluding remarks and recommendations are presented.

**Literature review**

Baumber et al. (2021), Du Plessis & Saayman (2011), Martin-Fuentes (2016), Mnguni & Leonard (2024), Rita et al. (2022), Tomlinson et al. (2023), Wong & Mohamed (2022) and Yang et al. (2023) assert that there is consensus that accommodation grading systems can be effective mechanisms to establish standards that provide tourism stakeholders (including accommodation consumers) with sufficient independently assessed information to inform their decisions. These authors also note that research on hotel classification (as referred to in several countries) or accommodation grading systems has been increasing, revealing the importance of official and independent accommodation grading in the tourism sector to institutionalise quality assurance by promoting agreed-upon, approved and standardised criteria and frameworks to assess and communicate information on the quality of services and amenities at accommodation establishments. Furthermore, these studies indicate that the main benefits of independent, assessor-based grading systems are enabling competition and differentiation among accommodation establishments; promoting and improving customer confidence, options, experiences and loyalty; providing graded establishments with marketing advantages associated with reputation building and branding; and aiding accommodation establishments to continuous improve as they strive to be graded, improve their grading or retain their 5-Star status. Moreover, Ripinga & Mazenda (2022) state that graded accommodation establishments in South Africa benefit from several promotional and marketing campaigns run by the National Department of Tourism. Additionally, Fredrick & Authority (2019) and Talias (2018) assert that accommodation grading systems are regulatory tools that can aid relevant government agencies and tourism authorities in evaluating and enforcing compliance with safety, health and environmental regulations. Despite its recognised importance, as noted in the previous section, there is limited empirically-based research that focuses on user perceptions of official accommodation grading systems

A Google Scholar search specifically shows that in the last 5 years, there has been a dominance in peer-reviewed research that focuses on online/ guest reviews (for example, Kolesárová et al., 2024; Zhu et al., 2020) or comparing these consumer ratings/ reviews with official grading ratings undertaken by assessors (for example, Kovács, 2025; Messias et al., 2024; Soifer et al., 2021), reinforcing the increasing importance of online user reviews that require examining consumer perceptions of official rating systems, the focus of this study. These studies are either desktop-based or content analysis of online reviews that do not examine the perceptions of users of the system/ platform they are using. The role of technological advancements and online rating systems (including consumer reviews and feedback based on experiences) influences consumption patterns and behaviours, raising questions about the value of official/ traditional grading systems. The studies focusing on official accommodation rating systems also tend to be desktop studies examining the impacts of grading on accommodation establishments (for example, Vagena & Manoussakis, 2021; Vlami et al., 2023) or interviews with accommodation managers/ employees (for example, Mugambi et al., 2021; Salama et al., 2024; Sufi, 2025). These studies tend to focus on hotels (neglecting the diverse forms of accommodation establishments) and graded establishments, despite most accommodation establishments not being graded. Additionally, there is limited research focusing on accommodation user perceptions of grading systems. Examining the relevance of official accommodation grading systems is particularly important since accommodation establishments pay to be graded, thus investing in a system that is assumed to be beneficial in terms of consumption, branding/ marketing and reputation. Additionally, in South Africa, the government via the National Department of Tourism supports the TGCSA. Thus, public funds are being used. A Google Scholar search further indicates that, in the South African context, the recent peer-reviewed studies (last 5 years) undertaken in relation to the TGCSA grading system include research focusing on increasing the number of graded establishments (Mothoagae & Joseph, 2020), the influence of user generated content in 3 to 5-Star hotels in Johannesburg (Rogerson et al., 2023), critical managerial skills for the accommodation sector at graded establishments and assessing the inclusion of water efficiency measures for grading purposes among 3 to 5-Star hotels in Hammanskraal (Mnguni & Leonard, 2024). Key themes in previous studies were the relationship between grading and pricing (Du Plessis & Saayman, 2011), and grading and marketing (Frost et al., 2019).

A few studies focus on guest perceptions of graded accommodation establishments. For example, Motha et al. (2022) interviewed 323 guests in one hotel franchise in Gauteng to examine their perceptions of the quality of services in relation to five dimensions (responsiveness, tangibles, reliability, assurance and empathy). Matiza & Slabbert (2025) examine consumers' perceived value of pro-environmental Star-graded accommodation by interviewing 440 South African domestic tourists. The South African studies tend to focus on specific forms of accommodation establishments, tourist types, or specific locations/ sites. Skare et al. (2023) specifically focus on tourist satisfaction related to accommodation use. The importance of user perceptions as well as building consumer trust and confidence in grading systems are underscored in these studies. The levels of value on grading

systems in influencing accommodation use decisions and perceptions of establishments tend to differ. This again reinforces the importance of examining user and other stakeholder perceptions. Focusing mainly on tourists neglects the increasing phenomenon of staycations, which, according to Li et al. (2024), refer to local residents booking into accommodation establishments in their area. This study adopts a national orientation and includes different types of accommodation establishments, targeting all accommodation users and not only tourists. It also specifically focuses on attitudes and perceptions of the grading system, with most studies focusing on perceptions of the graded establishments rather than the grading system. Official (government and tourism sector recognised) accommodation grading/ classification systems exist in many countries, including South Africa. The TGCSA's grading system is the official grading system in South Africa that, according to Du Plessis & Saayman (2011), Nunkoo et al. (2020) and Wong & Mohamed (2022), promotes standardisation and quality in the South African tourism sector, providing consumers and other stakeholders with reliable and credible information about the quality of accommodation establishments in the country thereby influencing consumer decisions and building trust within the sector. Furthermore, they assert that independent grading enables benchmarking as accommodation managers/ owners, consumers and other stakeholders can compare establishments against nationally recognised and accepted standards. Additionally, Fredrick & Authority (2019), Matiza & Slabbert (2025), Motha et al. (2022) and Mothoagae & Joseph (2020) indicate that accommodation grading/ classification systems encourage continuous improvements that contribute to increased competitiveness and sustainability. The official and independent Star grading system in South Africa is administered by the TGCSA nationally for different types of accommodation establishments, including hotels, guesthouses, lodges, self-catering facilities, bed and breakfasts (BnBs), hostels, caravan and camping sites and backpackers, listed by Ripinga & Mazenda (2022), using various physical and qualitative attributes/ accreditation standards to evaluate specific accommodation types. The rating is on a 5-Star scale, with the lowest being a 1-Star rating associated with economy or budget establishments that offer basic amenities and services, while the highest is a 5-Star rating for deluxe/ exclusive establishments that offer exceptional facilities, amenities, services, and fine dining options. According to Rogerson & Rogerson (2022: 41), in South Africa, the history of accommodation grading in South Africa can be traced to the Hotel Board's initiation of the grading system in the 1960s:

> Undertaken at a period of expansion in the domestic and international tourism industry as well as of rising government awareness as to the potential economic (and political) benefits from expanded tourism promotion, the activities of the Hotel Board addressed the long-standing shortcomings surrounding the quality and standards of provision of accommodation services in South African hotels.

The national Star grading scheme was officially launched in November 2001 under the management of TGCSA (a Section 21 Company, operating as a not-for-profit organisation and as a business unit of South African Tourism) to provide a continuous process of quality assurance to consumers in South Africa pertaining to tourism facilities and services offered (currently mainly focusing on accommodation establishments). In South Africa, grading is voluntary, and accommodation establishments pay to be assessed and graded. TGCSA (2025a) states that Star grading is based on an annual membership that involves a once-off application fee and automatic renewals of grading status, subject to the payment of annual membership fees. The grading assessments are undertaken by trained independent assessors who conduct inspections of accommodation establishments that apply for grading against globally recognised and benchmarked criteria and standards, and make recommendations to an Award Committee, which makes the final decision on whether the establishment should be graded and, if so, the Star rating to be awarded (TGCSA, 2012). Kokt & Mphirime (2022) state that in order to obtain a grading, accommodation establishments are required to comply with TGCSA's strict requirements. During the TGCSA's (2012) briefing to the Parliamentary Monitoring Group (PMG), it was noted that from a total of 23 467 accredited accommodation establishments (according to profiles listed on the South African Tourism website) in South Africa, close to a quarter (5 728 - 24.4%) were graded. In 2019, 5 200 accommodation establishments were graded, according to the TGCSA (2019a) reporting to the PMG. This trend suggests that most accommodation establishments in South Africa are not officially graded, and between 2012 and 2019, prior to the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, there was a decline in the number of TGCSA-graded establishments. More recent data were not available online to assess whether the declining trend continued and how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the number of graded establishments. What is evident, however, is that the Tourism Grading Support Programme, which provided funding for accommodation establishments to be graded, was terminated and has resumed in 2025, offering a discounted rate of up to 90% for qualifying accommodation establishments to apply for or renew existing grading (TGCSA, 2025a). This suggests that there is a need to encourage and incentivise accommodation establishments financially to apply for grading, which may be reflective of declining interest and/ or the inability to pay for grading. Ripinga & Mazenda (2022) state that the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on graded accommodation establishments resulted in revenue losses for the TGCSA, worsening the organisation's collection base.

The above discussion underscores the shifting landscape in relation to accommodation quality reviews and assessments, noting the limited research on consumer perceptions of grading systems rather than graded establishments, a gap in research that this study addresses. Furthermore, studies tend to be desktop-based or rely on one method for primary data collection, which reflects an important empirical gap in research to holistically examine how users perceive and understand the value of traditional grading systems such as that of the TGCSA in South Africa. The next section provides an overview of the mixed-methods approach adopted for this study. In terms of the theoretical grounding, the stakeholder theory is used, which is a widely used lens to consider organisations or individuals who are directly or indirectly influenced by or have influence in the tourism sector (Amoako et al., 2022; Bodhanwala & Bodhanwala, 2022; Franco et al., 2020). Bodhanwala & Bodhanwala (2022) specifically highlight the importance of using a stakeholder approach in understanding quality and performance considerations, central to accommodation

grading systems. Various stakeholders respond differently to accommodation grading, including organisations that support grading such as the TGCSA, consumers who either consider grading when deciding on which accommodation establishment to use, and accommodation establishments themselves that decide whether to participate in being graded. Nguyen et al. (2023), Tasnim et al. (2023) and Zvaigzne et al. (2023) assert that stakeholder theory is valuable to examine diverse perspectives, interests, concerns and experiences. Tasnim et al. (2023) state that in the context of tourism, consumers are the main stakeholders, followed by tourism businesses (accommodation establishments, which are the focus of this study). Thus, for the purposes of this article, for primary data collection, surveys were conducted with consumers as the primary stakeholders and key informant interviews were undertaken with purposively selected individuals as secondary stakeholders.

**Methodology**

A mixed-methods research design was adopted, including a desktop component that entailed reviewing academic publications, reports, and websites to undertake the literature review. For primary data collection, a combination of quantitative (500 structured accommodation consumer surveys using close-ended questions) and qualitative (10 purposively selected key informant interviews) methods was employed. Creswell & Creswell (2017) assert that mixed-methods research is generally adopted to understand the contexts and complexities of phenomena by examining broader trends, permitting generalisations, using a quantitative approach and engaging in qualitative discussions that provide in-depth insights. They assert that mixed-methods enhance research validity and reliability, as the strengths of each approach address the weaknesses of the other. In terms of the quantitative component, online and face-to-face interviews were undertaken with accommodation consumers in South Africa. A Google Forms link was widely distributed across the country, using various databases (including that of the Department of Tourism, other tourism organisations and accommodation establishments that were asked to invite their guests to participate in the study). Furthermore, individuals who received the link were asked to forward the invitation to others to participate. Additionally, given internet connectivity challenges, the online survey was complemented with face-to-face interviews by trained fieldworkers at purposively selected tourism sites in Durban, Cape Town and Johannesburg (South Africa's main tourism destinations) to increase representation and the response rate. The target population consisted of individuals who had used (in the last two years), were using, or planned to use (in the next year) an accommodation establishment in South Africa at the time of the interview. A screening question was used to ensure that only individuals in these categories participated. Teddlie & Tashakkori (2009) indicate that a minimum sample of 387 is needed when a targeted population is unknown, as was the case in this study, since the number of persons that fall into the categories of accommodation users could not be established. The recommended sample size of 387 was exceeded, with 500 surveys being completed and subsequently analysed. For the purposes of this article, descriptive analysis is undertaken using frequencies and percentages. Additionally, cross-tabulations and Chi-Square tests were used to establish whether there were statistically significant associations between demographic variables and other categorical variables, specifically awareness of the TGCSA grading system and extent to which the presence of the official grading system influence confidence in the quality and standards of services in accommodation establishments in South Africa. P-values of less than 0.05 denote a statistically significant association. For the qualitative component, 10 key informant interviews were conducted: 3 managers each from graded and ungraded accommodation establishments (6 in total), a tour guide, a tour operator, a researcher and hospitality organisation. Knowledgeable individuals about accommodation grading in South Africa were purposively selected. Furthermore, different types of graded (a 3-Star guesthouse, a 4-Star hotel and a 5-Star hotel) and ungraded (an Airbnb, a hotel and a BnB) accommodation establishments were chosen. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Human and Social Sciences Ethics Committee at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The findings of the qualitative and quantitative research are integrated thematically.

**Results and discussion**

The analysis of the survey and key informant results is undertaken thematically in this section. The first section briefly presents the respondents' demographic profiles. This is followed by discussion of the travel behaviours of accommodation consumers. Thereafter, knowledge and perceptions of the tourism accommodation grading system in South Africa are examined.

***Respondents' profiles***

In terms of nationality, the majority of the respondents were South Africans (88.8%), followed 5.4% permanent residents, 3.8% foreign nationals residing in South Africa and 2% who were international tourists. Most respondents were between the ages of 21 and 40 years (64.8%: 36% between 21-30 years and 28.8% between 31-40 years). The majority of the respondents 57.6%) were females, and 40.8% were males. The rest did not want to disclose their gender. Almost all respondents (99% in total) had completed secondary schooling (11.4%) or had post-schooling qualifications, with most having postgraduate degrees (31%), undergraduate degrees (29.6%) and certificates/ diplomas (18.4%), indicating the higher levels of qualifications among accommodation users compared to the general population. Similarly, most respondents were employed either on a full-time basis (53.4%) or self-employed (18.8%). The results indicate that the accommodation user respondents were from diverse backgrounds, permitting an examination of varied perceptions, needs and expectations among accommodation users. The importance of understanding the profiles of the accommodation users was also noted by Kolesárová et al. (2024), Motha et al. (2022) and the key informants, with one of the ungraded establishment key informants specifically stating that "the profiles and needs of consumers are changing constantly and one must understand and track these changes to identify and respond to key target markets". Putachote & Chokpiriyawat (2024) state that the demographic profiles of accommodation users are crucial to examine awareness and perceptions of accommodation choice behaviours. This includes the influence of grading systems since these characteristics often

shape how people access, process and utilise information pertaining to accommodation quality, affecting the extent to which they recognise and value grading systems.

***Travel behaviours of accommodation consumers***

Understanding travel behaviours of accommodation users is important to assess accommodation demand and experience. For the number of times respondents travelled overnight from their place of residence, the most prominent responses were once a year (36.6%) or once every 6 months (28%) (Table 1). Thus, most accommodation users stay in paid accommodation at least once or twice annually (64.6%). The rest of the respondents stated once every 3 months (18%), monthly (10.6%) and weekly (3.6%). With a few respondents providing other responses that reflected that the frequency of travel could not be predicted, mainly because it was dependent on the need to travel. The results indicate that most accommodation users are repeat visitors, consuming paid accommodation multiple times annually which is reflective of accommodation demand that establishments need to respond to. during the course of the year. Repeat visitation is important for accommodation establishments with one of the graded establishment key informants stating that they have "regular local and international customers". One of the ungraded establishment key informants also highlighted the importance of repeat visitors, indicating that the business has a simple and effective marketing strategy based on having relationships with clients that builds trust, which "makes being graded or not irrelevant". The frequency of travelling and use of paid accommodation are indicative of high levels of demand, which, according to the tour guide key informant, implies that various forms of accommodation establishments can co-exist to meet diverse needs.

**Table 1: Frequency of overnight travel from place of residence (n=500)**

| | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| No response | 4 | .8 |
| Weekly | 18 | 3.6 |
| Monthly | 53 | 10.6 |
| Once every 3 months | 90 | 18 |
| Once every 6 months | 140 | 28 |
| Once a year | 183 | 36.6 |
| Other (not predictable/ depend on need to travel) | 12 | 2.4 |

The main reasons to travel are important because they reflect consumer needs and the types of facilities/ amenities that are likely to be significant to the accommodation users. Table 2 shows that individuals travel for multiple purposes. The main reasons for travelling identified by the respondents were leisure and recreation (77.8%), followed by visiting friends and relatives (36.6%), business (25.6%) and Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions (MICE) (12.4%). The reasons to travel are important to consider in relation to grading, as indicated by Du Plessis & Saayman (2011) and Mothoagae & Joseph (2020) who particularly note the importance of individuals choosing graded establishments when engaged in business-related/ corporate travel. Similar sentiments were expressed by the researcher, tour operator and hospitality organisation key informants. The event planner key informant, for example, stated that when dealing with corporate and business clients for events, "no accommodation that has less than a 4-Star rating is even considered". The TGCSA key informant underscored that the travel disruptions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic that "decimated the tourism sector" are still affecting accommodation establishments, although a recovery is underway. This key informant also referred to continued staffing challenges since many employees left the sector permanently and new recruits lack the necessary levels of skills which has led to poor user experiences. Furthermore, this key informant indicated that businesses exited the tourism sector.

**Table 2: Main reason/s for travelling (n=500, multiple responses)**

| | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Leisure and recreation (vacations/ holidays) | 389 | 77.8 |
| Visiting friends and relatives | 183 | 36.6 |
| Business | 128 | 25.6 |
| MICE | 62 | 12.4 |

***Knowledge and perceptions of the accommodation grading system in South Africa***

Most respondents (63.8%) and all key informants were aware of the TGCSA grading system in South Africa. Chi-Square tests between the variables presented in the previous sub-sections and awareness of the grading system indicate that there were statistically significant associations for age ($p=.042$), level of education ($p<.001$), employment status ($p=.008$), frequency of overnight travel ($p<.001$) and business travel ($p=.007$). Specifically, the cross-tabulations reveal that older and more educated individuals who were employed on a full-time basis and travelled more frequently were more likely to be aware of the grading system. No statistically significant associations were discernible for nationality ($p=.426$), gender ($p=.748$) as well as leisure and recreation ($p=.309$), visiting friends and family ($p=.345$) and MICE travel ($p=.358$). All the key informants (including those from ungraded establishments) were aware of the TGCSA accommodation grading system. The key informant interviews further probed aspects of the system knowledgeable of. All key informants indicated that the grading was on Star classification from 1-Star to 5-Star, with a higher Star rating indicating better amenities, facilities and services. It is important to note, however, that only the hospitality organisation, researcher and two of the graded establishment key informants noted that rating was undertaken in relation to the type of accommodation. This is a crucial aspect to consider since the interpretation of the Star grading can influence perceptions and accommodation use decisions. Furthermore, among the key informants the level of awareness and depth of knowledge differed considerably from being very knowledgeable "because of research and training being done on the accommodation sector in South Africa" (researcher key informant) and "advising accommodation establishments and travellers

of the value of grading" (hospitality organisation key informant" to having a basic or limited understanding linked to "being aware that there is a 5-Star grading system" (one of the ungraded establishment key informants). Most of the key informants (with the exception of two of the ungraded establishment key informants) identified several criteria used in grading, displaying familiarity with key aspects. The graded establishment key informants were particularly detailed, given that they had gone through the application process. The specific criteria identified by the key informants included aspects pertaining to amenities/ facilities provided on the premises (such as parking, internet connectivity, entertainment facilities, room service/ eating facilities, bedding, furniture and appliances), service quality (including levels of cleanliness and hygiene, staff conduct and appearance, customer service, safety and security measures and room services) and compliance with regulations. The tour guide key informant stated that the focus was on attributes linked to guest experiences and needs. The criteria identified align with the TGCSA criteria, indicating generally high levels of knowledgeability among the key informants of the grading criteria. One of the graded establishment key informants noted that the criteria were provided by the TGCSA and was easy to understand. This key informant also noted that the assessors were extremely helpful and assisted the establishment in providing information during the application process. One of the graded establishment key informants was also knowledgeable about the recently introduced accolades intended to be a "recognition mechanism for niche market facilities and services provided at graded establishments in South Africa". According to TGCSA (2019b), accolades can be earned by graded establishments in 17 categories: golfing, pet-friendly, cycling-friendly, wine tourism, responsible tourism, family-friendly, hiking, water sports, equestrian, off-road activities, birding**,** wedding venue, resort, medical care, holistic wellness**,** spa and beauty, and hunting. All the key informants were aware that TGCSA was responsible for grading with most (except for two of the ungraded establishment key informant) being familiar with the grading process that including establishments applying to be graded, assessments by independent TGCSA assessors and a board/ committee making the final decision on whether an establishment should be rated and the level of rating. All the key informants were also aware of the application and annual membership fees with most indicating that this may be a stumbling block for some accommodation establishments who may want to be graded but cannot afford to do so. Most key informants also viewed the criteria and process to be fair and consistent, with one of the graded establishment key informants specifically noting: "Accommodation establishments are aware of the criteria before they are assessed and often assisted to undertake a self-assessment before they apply to determine whether they are ready or not. Many establishments use the criteria to focus on improvements so that they can meet the requirements to be graded."

This could also be linked to concerns regarding a low Star rating, discussed later, with establishments preferring to wait until they meet the criteria for a higher rating. One of the ungraded establishment and researcher key informants also questioned why assessments needed to be conducted annually. The ungraded establishment specifically states that "it is very unlikely that there would be major changes in service quality or amenities available within a year". Additionally, the researcher key informant noted that the need for annual assessments place a huge burden on TGCSA, which as limited resources and assessors. This could also raise issues relating to the quality of the assessments. Currently, according to the TGCSA (2025b), there are 6 500 establishments across the nine provinces that are assessed annually by 50 assessors. On average, each assessor is, therefore, expected to assess 130 establishments per year, which includes site visits. The tour operator key informant stated: "Given the number of establishments being assessed annually and the number of assessors, it is possible that assessments are being fast-tracked and that the focus is on ticking whether something is there or not (such as a television, internet service or shower) rather than focusing on the quality of services and amenities, which grading is supposed to be about." Among the 319 respondents who indicated that they were aware of the TGCSA accommodation grading system, they found about it from multiple sources as shown in Table 3. The main sources identified were booking platforms (websites) (50.2%), accommodation providers' websites (35.7%) and social media platforms (33.9%). Additional ways identified were travel agents (27%), recommendations from friends or family (word-of-mouth) (22.6%), government or official tourism websites (19.2%) and travel guidebooks or brochures (14.6%). Some of the key informants also noted the increasing role of social media, especially in relation to the influence of reviews and online ratings, which is also highlighted by Kolesárová et al. (2024) and Zhu et al. (2020). The tour guide and hospitality organisation key informants further indicated that some of ways in which the public and accommodation establishments receive information about grading are not valid and could result in confusion and misinformation.

**Table 3: How came to know about the grading system, if aware (n=319, multiple responses)**

| | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Booking platforms (websites) | 160 | 50.2 |
| Accommodation providers' websites | 114 | 35.7 |
| Social media platforms | 108 | 33.9 |
| Travel agents | 86 | 27 |
| Recommendations from friends or family (word-of-mouth) | 72 | 22.6 |
| Government or official tourism websites | 61 | 19.1 |
| Travel guidebooks or brochures | 47 | 14.7 |

In terms of the perceptions of the value of grading, respondents were asked the extent to which the presence of an official grading system influences their confidence in the quality and standards of services in accommodation establishments in South Africa. Table 4 indicates that more than half of the respondents (53.6%) stated to a great extent, with fewer respondents indicating to a less extent (23.8%) and not at all (13%). Chi-Square tests between demographic variables and the extent to which the presence of an official grading system influences their confidence in the quality and standards of services in accommodation establishments in South Africa indicate that there were statistically significant associations for age ($p<.001$), gender ($p=.004$), level of education ($p<.001$) and employment status ($p<.001$). Specifically, the cross-tabulations reveal that older females who were more educated and employed on a full-time basis were more likely to indicate that presence of an official grading system influenced their

confidence in the quality and standards of services in accommodation establishments in South Africa to a great extent. No statistically significant associations were discernible for frequency of overnight travel (p=.630) and nationality (p=.720). The results suggest that there is a positive attitude towards grading accommodation by many accommodation users, while some do not place value on grading. This is aligned with sentiments expressed by the researcher key informants that not all accommodation users value official grading systems. Additionally, as noted earlier, most key informants noted that online and social media reviews are gaining prominence, with one of the ungraded establishment key informants stating that "reviews provide current feedback and customer experiences rather than on assessments undertaken at a specific time by one so-called 'expert' that is based on ticking boxes".

**Table 4: Rating of the extent to which the presence of an official grading system influences confidence in the quality and standards of services in accommodation establishments in South Africa (n=500)**

| | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| No response | 3 | .6 |
| Don't know/ not sure | 45 | 9.0 |
| Great extent | 268 | 53.6 |
| Less extent | 119 | 23.8 |
| Not at all | 65 | 13 |

Notable differences were found among the key informants from graded and ungraded accommodation establishments in terms of attitudes towards the current TGCSA grading system, with unsurprisingly substantial support among the graded establishment key informants compared to those from ungraded establishments. For example, one of the graded establishment key informants referred to the TGCSA grading system as "the backbone of the accommodation industry in South Africa to provide quality assurance for travellers". Another graded establishment key informant stated that accommodation grading ensures "consistency and transparency so that customers can make informed decisions based on credible and independent information". On the other hand, one of the ungraded establishment key informants referred to the current system as being "outdated with a limited understanding of changes in how users make decisions in the era of social media and online reviews", as highlighted by Kolesárová et al. (2024), Kovács (2025) and Messias et al. (2024). Another ungraded establishment key informant stated the cost of grading does not correlate with the "return on investment for smaller or less established accommodation that are unlikely to receive more than a 2-Star rating". This key informant, together with the researcher and tour operator key informants, further noted that consumers perceive lower Star grading as being inadequate and reflective of poor quality, which is a reason why many establishments opt not to be graded if they know that they meet the criteria for a lower grading. This concern is also highlighted by Han et al. (2024) and Lynch & Tucker (2013).

## Conclusion and recommendations

This study addresses a critical gap in knowledge about official accommodation grading by examining awareness and perceptions among stakeholders, especially accommodation users, of South Africa's TGCSA's accommodation grading system. By using a mixed-methods approach, drawing on accommodation user surveys and key informant interviews, insights are provided about official grading systems in the context of changing landscape influenced by online reviews and social media. The findings reveal that awareness levels of the TGCSA grading system are generally high among the stakeholders, including accommodation users. The grading system is also perceived to have value, especially among graded establishments, although there are differences among respondents and stakeholders. Demographic variables of accommodation users influence awareness and perceptions with the results indicating that older females who travel frequently and are more educated and employed on a full-time basis are generally more aware of the TGCSA grading system and are more confident that the grading system contributes to assuring quality and standards. Most of the key informants also recognised the value of having an official grading system although some expressed concerns in relation to relevance, frequency of assessments and costs. Most also acknowledged the importance of the integration of online reviews. Key recommendations emanating from this study is the importance of raising awareness of the TGSCA grading system among accommodation users. The Star grading should specifically be the focus of raising awareness given the negative perceptions associated with lower Star grading. Future research focusing on accommodation user perceptions should include examining aspects of the grading system that consumers are aware of to establish which areas should be concentrated on when communicating to the public generally and targeting accommodation users specifically. Additionally, grading criteria should be revisited to include online reviews of establishments to align traditional accommodation grading practices with current ways in which users share their experiences and use feedback from other users to make decisions. Given the current resources that TGCSA has available, including the number of assessors, it is suggested that there should be acceptance that not all establishments should be graded. Furthermore, annual assessments should be reconsidered and renewal assessments should be undertaken once in three years. The credibility of the assessments will be increased and the costs reduced, which may encourage more establishments to apply to be graded. This study, therefore, underscores the importance of empirically-based research to assess awareness and perceptions of accommodation grading systems. The findings reveal that the 5-Star grading system remains relevant in the South African system. Still, it needs to be continuously revised to respond to changes and more attention should be paid to raise awareness among the key stakeholders, specifically accommodation users and establishments.

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