

## Abstract

### **Purpose**

To examine consumers' perception of food safety for vegetables at traditional urban market outlets in a developing country context and test whether curiosity-motivated information acquisition and personal control over choice of stimuli influence consumer involvement, resulting in more differentiated mental models.

### **Design/methodology/approach**

The Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET) in standard and modified form was used to develop consumers' mental models for food safety.

### **Findings**

The cognitive content and structure of aggregated consumers' mental models were identified and mapped. The maps included negative and positive meanings, indicating a need to tackle the hygiene problems prevailing in most traditional markets. ZMET generated a more differentiated map when people were empowered with a camera to collect stimuli.

### **Research limitations/implications**

Using ZMET to understand food safety perceptions avoids consumers being led in their responses, views and feelings about food safety.

### **Practical implications**

Policy, regulatory frameworks and marketing actions by value chain actors in the fresh vegetable subsector should give priority to tackling the hygiene problem prevalent in most traditional markets in developing countries.

### **Originality/value**

This paper provides novel needs-driven theoretical and practical insights into the actual meaning representation of food safety, which actually drives consumer thoughts and behaviour. Making use of a camera in the collection of self-provided images for the ZMET interview led to higher levels of involvement and further differentiation of mental models.