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Megan Lee

Danielle Augustine

Melinda Moore

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MANAGING RECRUITMENT AND DATA COLLECTION: ONLINE FOCUS GROUPS BEST PRACTICES AND STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS SCAMMERS

ABSTRACT

Common methods to collect data include quantitative, qualitative, and mixed method approaches. Although it is common to complete data collection in-person, the onset of COVID-19 has resulted in the increased use of online modalities. Qualitative research is commonly gathered through individual or focus group interviews. However, best practices outlining strategies when conducting online focus groups and approaches to address issues specific to online research (i.e., scammers) are limited. Due to the growing use of data collection through such means, it is imperative to draw out specific strategies that could regulate data quality and reduce the chances of scamming. The current article addresses this practical gap by providing a synthesis of the available literature on online focus groups that document best practices and suggestions to deal with scammers which is currently missing from the literature. The goal was to provide initial suggestions to improve data quality of online focus groups by examining the available literature that outlines best practices, addresses the issues of scammers, and to provide a concise and comprehensive overview of identified literature. The article is organized beginning with a review of the literature. The research is then synthesized including an outline of best practices and strategies to address scammers when engaging in online focus groups. The article closes with a discussion of the significance of the review, limitations, and article summary. Scammers are prevalent in online spaces. Although this article provides a preliminary outline of suggestions from the literature, more research is necessary that provides specific examples of how challenges have been addressed and the impact of including the recommended strategies on the research process and outcomes.

Keywords

Qualitative research; Focus groups; Online; Data quality; Scammers.

1. Introduction

Qualitative research data collection is mostly conducted through individual or focus group interviews, observations, or records/archival review in participants' natural settings in-person or virtually (Daniel, 2016; Jackson et al., 2007). Asper and Corte (2019) define qualitative research as “an iterative process in which improved understanding of the scientific community is achieved by making new significant distinctions resulting from getting closer to the phenomenon studied” (pp. 155). Questions answered by qualitative research generally address “what” is happening by describing and interpreting a specific phenomenon (Agius, 2013).

The onset of COVID-19 has resulted in an increase of online qualitative and quantitative research (De Man et al., 2021; Keen et al., 2022). Many researchers adapted research modalities to accommodate the emerging uncertainty and changing social circumstances (Rodgers, 2024). However, it is important to understand the nuances of online research modalities, which differ from in-person research (Namey et al., 2020). There are often a different set of challenges encountered in the online settings that influence the data quality and integrity. Specifically, when engaging in online focus groups, managing the recruitment of research participants, and collecting data from them remains a challenge (Huckins, 2021; Jones et al., 2021). Thus, more research synthesizing literature describing best practices when conducting online focus groups is necessary.

Conducting online research has the added risk of experiencing issues with scammers (i.e., participants who pretend to be someone else, at times, with the intent of financial gain) (Lawlor et al., 2021). The issue of scammers, imposters, or fraudulent participants (all terms are presented in the literature and will be used interchangeably throughout) in online research is commonly discussed and linked to quantitative research (Huckins, 2021; Jones et al., 2021; Lawlor et al., 2021). However, there is limited available literature on similar issues in online focus groups and related suggestions on how to minimize scammer inclusion. Due to the growing use of online focus groups, it is imperative to outline best practices to regulate data quality and strategies to address the issue of scammers. The current review addresses this gap in literature by outlining documented strategies that enhance the data quality in online focus groups. The purpose is to provide a synthesis of the limited available literature, outline best practices to manage recruitment and data collection when completing online focus groups, and provide suggestions to deal with scammers. The research questions guiding the current review are 1.) To what extent does online focus group literature discuss best practices when conducting online focus groups and what are those practices? 2.) What strategies exist in literature that address the issue of scammers (also fraudulent participants and imposters) when conducting online focus groups?

1.1 Author Statement

At the time of this review, we (the authors), consisted of a graduate research assistant and two full-time faculty members. We were engaged on a collaborative project to examine the experiences of families living in a southeastern state in accessing services for their children. Due to the lingering impacts of COVID-19, most focus groups were scheduled via Zoom. Advertisements about the study were shared through multiple sources including social media. While completing data collection we immediately experienced participant red flags including inability to verbally engage participants during interviews, spelling errors in written responses, inconsistent information, participants requesting gift cards via email versus postal mail, and persistent questions from participants about how to access gift cards when being asked to respond to interview questions. We proceeded with caution during initial interviews. However, data collection was ceased once it was clear that recruitment efforts would need to be revisited. Because of the issues, we collaborated with our technical team and went on the hunt to find other examples in the literature of those experiencing similar issues. To our surprise, not only was information about online focus group best practices limited, but there is also scant literature available about addressing scammers when conducting focus groups online. The following paper was written to help provide others with a synthesis of available literature for ease of access. Due to issues of privacy and confidentiality, the project described above will not be included as part of the following discussion.

2. Literature Review

Traditionally, focus groups have been conducted in-person (Morgan, 1996; Willemsen et al., 2022). Though, with the advent of COVID-19, virtual platforms to collect qualitative data are increasing (Davies et al., 2020; Namey et al., 2020). During online focus group sessions multiple individuals gather remotely to discuss a specific topic (Rupert et al., 2022). Data can be collected through synchronous (i.e., real time) or asynchronous (i.e., over a stretch of time) approaches (Brown, 2022; Forestal et al., 2015; Mick & Middlebrook, 2015; Tran, 2021). Asynchronous approaches are purported to be most like in-person interviews however, there are mixed reports about the benefits (e.g., efficiency, eliminating distance issues, data quality, etc.) and challenges (e.g., relationship development, technology limitations, sample recruitment, etc.) of online focus groups (Amri et al., 2021; Ratislavova & Ratislav, 2014). Technology use, access, and literacy are requirements when engaging in online research which could exclude those who lack technological infrastructure or knowledge (Marques et al., 2021; Davies et al., 2020). In addition, internet issues such as connectivity, bandwidth, video freezing, sound quality, participant fatigue, distraction, and privacy are common issues reported (Brown, 2022; Marques et al., 2021).

When conducting online focus groups research, it is crucial to consider what practices may be required compared to in-person focus groups. Best practices are evidence-based strategies that inform research, programs, and interventions (Osburn et al., 2011).

Although literature outlining approaches when conducting in-person focus groups is vast, the literature available on best practices when completing online focus groups is limited (Brown, 2022; Daniels et al., 2019). There are some similarities when completing in-person and online focus groups (Brown, 2022). However, there are also significant differences including recruitment, data collection, participant engagement, and room setup, to name a few (Forrestal et al., 2015; Willemsen et al., 2022; Zagonel et al., 2022). Shifting modalities is not an equal exchange with approaches easily translating from one setting to the other. Researchers should consider the similarities and differences of both modalities prior to engaging in online focus groups to identify the best approach for their target population.

Research on scammers is more quantitative focused with limited literature regarding online focus groups (Huckins, 2021; Jones et al., 2021; Lawlor et al., 2021). However, the issues of scammers can impact the integrity of an online focus group study like issues seen in quantitative studies. Quantitative studies have documented that fraudulent participants have intentionally completed study tasks inappropriately, may use automated systems to submit responses, or submit responses more than once (Jones et al., 2021; Lawlor et al., 2021). For qualitative studies, Flicker (2004) provided a case example of someone who told a story during an interview that was likely untrue. Roehl and Harland (2022) shared an experience when completing online interviews where participants faked their identities or exaggerated aspects of their experiences. In both cases information provided does not accurately reflect the perspectives of someone who has actual experience with a specific phenomenon (Roehl & Harland, 2022). This could impact the research data quality and integrity and the development of programs, policies, and practice procedures (Flicker, 2004; Roehl & Harland, 2022). Furthermore, when you add incentives, fraudulent participants appear more motivated to engage and may result in the disbursement of incentives to unintended recipients (Lawlor et al., 2021).

Due to the growth of online focus groups, more effort is needed to ensure quality of research procedures. Before implementation of an online focus group study, it is imperative to consider the appropriateness of asynchronous or synchronous approaches. The selected approach will be determined by the specific purpose of the study. In addition, it is crucial to have awareness of the advantages and disadvantages of online focus groups to put measures in place to mitigate any potential issues. Without careful consideration and understanding the overall quality of the study could be compromised. With this virtual context in mind, the following sections will provide additional information regarding available literature on best practices and strategies to address scammers when completing online focus groups.

3. Synthesis of Available Literature

An initial multi-search was completed to identify peer reviewed journal articles completed between 2013 to January 2023.

Only review, summative, and conceptual articles were included. Research articles that included data collection through online focus groups and interviews with actual participants were excluded. The decision to exclude methodological articles was made due to the variability of study designs between articles. The purpose of the current review was to identify best practices and strategies to address the issue of scammers when completing online focus groups. Completing an in-depth comparison of methodologies is beyond the scope of the current article and is more appropriate for a systematic review or meta-analysis. Literature searches combined the use of the following terms: Focus groups, virtual focus groups, online focus groups, best practices, scammers, imposters, and fraudulent participants.

The analytical strategy to review articles consisted of engaging in coding through content analysis (Merriam, 2009; White & Marsh, 2006). Content within the articles was analyzed by the first and second author of the current article to identify themes of best practices and strategies to address scammers, imposters, or fraudulent participants. First, the article titles, abstracts, and key terms were reviewed to identify inclusion of the above terms. Once terms were identified in an article, the entire article was read. The article was analyzed using the above terms as a guide to code content within the articles. Article content was labeled using notations to identify specific codes and to pull out themes that align with the concept of focus group best practices or strategies to address scammers. Only original articles (i.e., articles located during the initial search) references and other articles that cited original articles were reviewed to identify additional literature addressing best practices and issues of scammers. Additional articles were assessed using the same process described above.

A total of 15 articles were reviewed. Of the articles reviewed, 10 focused on best practices and five focused on scammers. Nine of the 10 articles focused specifically on best practices when conducting online focus groups. There was one article that blended suggestions for qualitative research that included both individual interviews and online focus groups. Of the five articles focused on scammers, there were two from quantitative studies (Lawlor et al., 2021; Teitcher et al., 2015), one that focused on qualitative individual interviews and focus groups (Jones et al., 2021), and two focused specifically on online individual interviews (Flicker, 2004; Roehl & Harland, 2022). No article solely focused on the issue of scammers when conducting online focus groups. The purpose of the current review is to provide a synthesis of the scant literature on best practices when conducting online focus groups and to outline strategies to manage scammers. However, due to the gap in the available literature on scammers and online focus groups, all articles were included in the synthesis. The following best practices and strategies when completing online focus groups are provided based on the included literature. However, an extensive and systematic review is beyond the scope of the current paper and provided recommendations should be considered with this limitation in mind.

Five themes for best practices were identified specific to conducting online focus groups. In addition, eight themes were identified that outline strategies to address scammers.

The two articles specifically addressing the issue of scammers in online individual interviews also outlined five methods to deal with suspected fraudulent responses (see Table 1). Further elaboration of the above themes will follow.

Table 1. Article Review Themes

Articles Themes		
Best Practices	Scammers	Fraudulent Responses
Participant recruitment	CAPTCHA	Cynic
Confidentiality agreement	Cookies	Skeptic
Length of interview	Trick questions	Seeker
Room set-up	Single use links	Reflexive journaling
Group size	Waiting rooms and passcodes	Team discussion
	Verification process	
	Limiting IP address responses	
	Consent clause for incentives	

3.1 Best Practices in Online Focus Groups

Engaging in best practices is one strategy to ensure the quality of research. Brown (2022) outlined similarities between in-person and virtual focus groups including the number of groups, types of questions, and data collection and analysis. In general, a minimum of four groups should be completed. This allows for participants to have more time and space to share their perspectives, and it also provides opportunity to support more individual and collective participant engagement. Use of opening, key, and concluding questions should be incorporated to structure the interviews to familiarize participants to the topic, to assess experiences on the relevant topic, and to close out the interview (Brown, 2022). In addition, data collection and analysis should occur concurrently to reduce chances of memory lapse and document epiphanies immediately following interviews. Differences between modalities included recruitment of participants, confidentiality agreement, length, room set-up, and group size. Differences will be discussed in further details below.

Online focus groups require additional preparation compared to in-person focus groups.

In preparation for online focus groups, it is imperative to consider recruitment strategies, scheduling interviews, testing equipment and software, and participant engagement prior to online focus groups (Brown, 2022; Forrestal et al., 2015; Willemsen et al., 2022). Zagonel et al. (2022) also suggest the development of a research team to assist with note taking, management of technology, transcription of interviews, and observation of participant nonverbal cues. The team should receive training on the online platform and the lead researcher should explain each team member's role including managing technology, moderating the discussion, and operating the chat. Taking additional steps to prepare the research team will support the successful completion of online focus groups.

To manage issues with confidentiality it is suggested to provide a secure link and consent form prior to the online focus group (Brown, 2022). Consents should clearly indicate privacy protocols and the need for individuals to engage in a setting that is private to eliminate others overhearing the virtual discussion (Brown, 2022). In addition, online focus groups have the added disadvantage of increased concerns of privacy (Brown, 2022; Turney & Pocknee, 2005). Privacy can be protected using avatars and pseudonyms (Oringderff, 2004) or allowing participants to engage with their cameras off. Lastly, it is recommended to use software and technology supported by the team's organization, institution, or university due to a higher level of security (Turney & Pocknee, 2005).

Willemsen et al. (2022) shared considerations regarding the reduction of online focus group length as online discussions are often experienced as more tiring. The suggested length for online focus groups is between 60 to 90 minutes (Brown 2022; Willemsen et al., 2022). In addition, interviews should be scheduled during a convenient time for participants (Forrestal et al., 2015). Limiting interview length and flexible scheduling are a few approaches that can streamline the overall online focus group experience.

When completing online synchronous interviews, Willemsen et al. (2022) and Brown (2022) recommended including 4-8 participants, provide a 5-minute break halfway through the interview, establish signals when participants desire to speak, have two researchers present (one to facilitate and the other to note take, manage technology, and/or observe participants), and carefully review privacy considerations. Researchers are encouraged to recruit more participants to account for possible no shows (Forrestal et al., 2015). Effectively managing online focus group logistics and the number of participants included are best practices that positively influence online focus group experiences.

Video-conferencing tools should be thoroughly evaluated based on the best fit for the study being conducted (Brown, 2022; Marques et al., 2021). Researchers should consider the use of free and easily accessible online platforms to increase accessibility and reach. Some examples of online platforms include Zoom, MS (Microsoft) Teams, Whatsapp, Skype, to name a few (Keemink et al., 2022). Researchers should adequately prepare by establishing the rules and awareness about the platform being used (Willemsen et al., 2022; Zagonel et al., 2022).

In addition, there should be awareness of the different tools available that can be used to protect the privacy of the individual (e.g., ability to blur backgrounds).

Brown (2022) described best practices specific to virtual face-to-face focus groups which includes technological considerations, roles of the facilitator and notetaker, and considerations for international participants. Best practices include detailed correspondence with participants in advance to verify the participants meet inclusion criteria, obtaining informed consent at the beginning of the session, have screensharing options to display or participants to display items pertinent to the research study, and thanking participants following the interview (Forrestal et al., 2015; Willemsen et al., 2022). For the facilitator, individuals should log in at least 10-20 minutes prior to the interview and if including international participants, to consider differences in time zones. Incorporating these recommendations can enhance the effectiveness of online focus groups and in turn, the quality of data collected through it.

3.2 Strategies to Manage Scammers in Online Focus Groups

When conducting online qualitative research it is crucial to be aware of the potential risk of scams (Huckins, 2021; Roehl & Harland, 2022; Teitcher et al., 2015) especially when respondents receive incentives (Lawlor et al., 2021). The issue of scammers has largely been discussed in quantitative research (Huckins, 2021; Jones et al., 2021; Lawlor et al., 2021) and scantily in qualitative studies. However, with virtual qualitative research becoming more common, it is imperative to consider similar issues for qualitative focus group studies (Jones et al., 2021). Due to insufficient literature related to completion of online focus groups, recommendations are derived from qualitative and quantitative articles that can be applied to online focus groups. Thus, the following discussion will begin by broadly examining suggestions from quantitative literature, following by examples from qualitative research, and eventually narrowed to research on focus groups. This section concludes with a discussion outlining approaches to deal with suspected fraudulent participant responses.

3.3 Translatable Suggestions from Quantitative Research

When conducting online quantitative research Lawlor et al. (2021) proposed processes to address online survey fraud including use of CAPTCHAS (security measure to tell computers and humans apart), cookies (i.e., small files, including unique identifiers that web servers send to browsers), and trick questions. The mentioned processes could also add a layer of security when conducting online focus groups (Brown, 2022; Samardzic et al., 2023). An example of CAPTCHAs is the use of distorted letters and numbers as a prerequisite to access research materials or interview platforms. The inclusion of trick questions within questionnaires can also assist with filtering out potential scammers. Lastly, cookies will alert the researcher if participants are engaging in online focus groups using the same computer or a computer that was used by another participant.

When completing online focus groups, adding the ability to assess cookies is imperative to minimize the inclusion of scammers. Collaborating with the technical team can assist with examining cookies.

3.4 Suggestions from Online Qualitative Research

Jones et al. (2021) provided a 'how to guide' to address threats to data quality and integrity in asynchronous virtual qualitative research. They provide similar suggestions that are described above (e.g., CAPTCHA, limiting response from IP addresses (similar to cookies), etc.). In addition, they outline suggestions when incentives are involved. If incentives are offered, they stress including a clause in the consent form outlining conditions under which payment will not be sent (e.g., if participants are unable to provide a home or email address). This is done to ensure participants are aware of the reasons they will not receive incentives to rule out potential scammers which is also relevant to online focus groups. Lastly, they suggest setting minimum limits to free text when requesting online responses and requiring responses to all questions which will limit generic and vague responses and will help identify possible scammers. This suggestion is applicable to chat discussions when conducting synchronous focus groups or online focus groups that are conducted via a chat feature asynchronously.

To manage the issue of scammers in online focus groups, waiting rooms and passcodes provide some control by the researcher to provide access to only those permitted to attend (Samardzic et al., 2023). In addition, passcodes provide security because codes should only be shared with identified participants. Lastly, it is recommended that researchers should develop a verification process by reaching out to participants before interviews via video conferencing, email, phone, or an online survey to confirm identification (Rodham & Gavin, 2006; Zagonel et al., 2022). When conducting online focus groups, the verification process will provide an opportunity to eliminate the inclusion of potential scammers (Roehl & Harland, 2022).

3.5 Suggestions Specific to Online Focus Groups

Best practice recommendations for online focus groups include the use of single use links pre-data collection and collection of personal identifiers (e.g., email addresses, names, etc.) (Brown, 2022; Samardzic et al., 2023). Use of single links limits access to unintended users. Single links are created when scheduling the online interview using software such as Zoom, MS Teams, etc. A new link should be created for each scheduled interview. Lastly, collection of personal identifiers prior to data collection will provide an additional verification step to reduce the possible inclusion of fraudulent participants.

3.6 Approaches to Deal with Suspected Fraudulent Responses

To deal with suspected fraudulent responses in virtual individual interviews, Flicker (2004) suggested three major approaches: Cynic, Skeptic, and Seeker. The first approach (cynic) assumes that the whole interview is false, and the entire interview must be excluded from the analysis. Second, the skeptic approach assumes that parts of the interview are fabricated and recommends inclusions of the interview in data analysis by carefully comparing data responses to more trustworthy participant responses. Finally, the seeker approach establishes the data integrity based on the willing involvement of the participants. Flicker (2004) explains that researchers should evaluate the primary purpose of the research and how truth is understood and allow theoretical and epistemological choices guiding the study to determine the best approach. Similar tactics could be applied to online focus group interviews.

Roehl and Harland (2022) provided strategies to evaluate the exclusion of imposters or fraudulent participants when conducting online individual interviews. They advocated for the inclusion of reflexive journaling and engagement in discussions with the research team of behaviors, incidences, and concerns that a participant is suspicious. Reflexive journaling assists with documenting the process of completing online focus groups that includes participant nonverbal cues, questions that come up for the researcher, written accounts of any potential biases, and details about what transpired and why (Lincoln & Guba, 1982; Roehl & Harland, 2022). Following these additional precautions when conducting online focus groups could enhance the data quality, data collection, and integrity of the research.

During the time of the current review, no one article was found that focused solely on the issue of scammers in online focus groups. Thus, suggestions were taken from other forms of qualitative research (i.e., individual interviews), articles addressing both online focus groups and individual interviews, and quantitative research. However, although suggestions from other online methodologies are translatable, further research is necessary that prioritizes online focus groups specifically.

4. Discussion

The current review adds to existing literature on online focus groups by outlining best practices and strategies to deal with scammers utilizing examples located in articles designed to complete quantitative and qualitative research studies mostly focused on the completion of individual interviews (Brown, 2022; Flicker, 2004; Huckins, 2021; Roehl & Harland, 2022). This was necessary because no one article could be found that specifically addressed the issue of scammers when completing online focus groups. The issue of scammers when completing online focus groups was only partially covered in one of the articles included. In addition, although several articles were located outlining best practices when conducting online focus groups, the research is limited (Brown, 2022).

This review is one attempt at synthesizing best practices and identifying relevant strategies to address scammers when completing online focus groups. However, the current review is not exhaustive and additional research is necessary to emphasize the use of and suggestions when completing online focus groups.

Although the current review adds to the literature, it is not without limitations. First, although literature was reviewed and guided by previous research and specific search terms, extending research terms and completion of a systematic review of literature or meta-analyses would help to enhance the current topic. Second, a focus on peer reviewed literature including conceptual, review, and summative articles and exclusion of research articles and books may have disregarded additional writings relevant to the current topic. Expanding search options to include other forms of literature could result in the inclusion of additional literature. Third, limiting search criteria to articles published in a 10-year timeframe and review of references and citations of original articles may exclude other examples. To exhaust search options, the timeframe could be increased to capture additional literature while engaging in similar approaches of reviewing references and citation of articles. Lastly, inclusion of articles outlining strategies to address scammers from multiple methodologies provides a broad perspective that is not narrowed to examination of online focus groups. However, due to the limited availability of scammer related online focus group research, this approach was necessary to identify applicable suggestions.

Even with the above limitations, the current review is relevant and timely especially due to the rise in conducting focus groups online. Better understanding best practices related to online formats and strategies to deal with scammers is essential. It would be erroneous to assume that transition of research from in-person to online formats can be done without careful consideration of the differences between the two modalities. This current review was conducted with the intent to provide evidence-based guidance when completing online focus groups to manage data collection, recruitment, and dealing with scammers.

5. Conclusion

Qualitative data collection methods are generally completed when attempting to establish a greater understanding and more in-depth understanding of a specific phenomenon or experience (Turato, 2005). Focus groups include the examination of experiences of multiple individuals at one time (Morgan, 1996). The use of online focus groups is growing (Brown, 2022; Davies, et al., 2020). However, with the increase in use of online formats, the issue of scammers, imposters, or fraudulent participants has equally risen (Huckins, 2021; Roehl & Harland, 2022; Teitcher, et al., 2015). Best practices for online focus groups resemble in-person focus groups with some exceptions (e.g., online recruitment and data collection) (Brown, 2022). Prior to conducting focus groups, researchers should consider factors that could impact development of the study, recruitment, data collection, analysis, and outcomes.

The current article is one attempt at reviewing strategies and best practices in managing challenges that arise when completing online focus groups. Online focus group best practices include addressing areas of participant recruitment, confidentiality agreement, length of interview, room set-up, and group size. The issue of scammers is a growing issue due to the increase utilization of online focus groups. Translatable strategies from online quantitative research and individual online interviews provide a foundation to build upon the limited research related to online focus groups. Strategies include use of CAPTCHA, cookies and/or limited responses from the same IP address, including trick questions, setting text limits, establishing a verification process, use of single links, collecting personal identifiers, and inclusion of clauses when incentives are involved (Brown, 2022; Jones et al., 2022; Lawlor et al., 2021; Rodham & Gavin, 2006; Samardzic et al., 2023; Zagonel et al., 2022). In addition, there are varying perspectives about how to handle data or responses received from suspected fraudulent participants. Suggestions range from accountability or quality control processes such as discussing concerns with the research team to how to make decisions about whether to include none, part, or the entire participant responses (Flicker, 2004; Roehl & Harland, 2022). More research that provides examples of challenges due to scammers and outlines additional best practices when conducting online focus groups is warranted.

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Megan Lee

Kennesaw State University, USA

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9984-3635>

✉ mlee235@kennesaw.edu

Danielle Augustine

Centers for Disease Control, USA

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3539-6909>

✉ danielle.augustine@uga.edu

Melinda Moore

University of Georgia, USA

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0000-0000-0000>

✉ melinda.moore@uga.edu