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# Usability Bugs in Open Source Software and Online Forums

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## Abstract

The unlimited number of open source software (OSS) users and the importance of end users' experience in determining software quality make usability an even more critical quality attribute for OSS than it is for proprietary software. The research model of this study establishes the relationship between usability errors in open source software and online public forums. The results of this empirical analysis provide evidence about active management of usability related issues in open source software. To conduct this research, we used a dataset consisting of 1753 open source software projects, covering a broad range of categories. The results of the study show that online forums play a significant role in identifying and fixing usability bugs in open source software.

## 1. Introduction

The collaborative nature of the OSS culture utilizes a volunteer community that conducts its development activities in a decentralized environment, effectively lowering production costs and improving software quality [1]. In recent years, the increasing use of open source software results from factors such as easy, and for the

1 most part, free access to the internet. In OSS, the experience of end users has become  
2 an important issue. With the popularity of OSS among organizations as well as among  
3 common novice users, the OSS community is no longer limited to “*technically adept*”  
4 individuals. Hence, the requirements and expectations of OSS are not the same as they  
5 were a decade ago, when software developers were considered to be the only OSS  
6 users.  
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13 In the ISO 9241-11 Standard [2], usability is defined as “*the extent to which a product*  
14 *can be used by specified users to achieve specified goals with effectiveness, efficiency*  
15 *and satisfaction in a specified context of use.*” Usability bug reporting refers to  
16 design-time or runtime errors in software that are specific to and reported by the user.  
17  
18 Zhao et al. [3] relate improvement in software quality to usability of OSS products. By  
19 analyzing a set of hypotheses they study effects of different components on  
20 effectiveness and efficiency of OSS usability improvement. Nichols and Twidale [4]  
21 observe a partiality in treating usability bugs as compared to functionality bugs. Çetin  
22 et al. [5] consider effective feedback from end users as one of the ways to improve  
23 OSS usability. They suggest that effective feedback can be attained by providing users  
24 with a convenient way to report the software errors that they come across.  
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37 In OSS, the main route for users is via online Forums. In this study we embark to  
38 empirically examine the role of on-line user forums, the main point of interaction for  
39 users, and the critical areas of bug reporting in general, and usability bug reporting  
40 and fixing, in particular. We have used a dataset of 1753 open source software  
41 projects covering a broad range of categories to study the research model of this  
42 investigation.  
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50 In the next section we are presenting the literature review that motivated this research work.  
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52 Section-3 illustrates the research model and the hypotheses of this study. Section-4 explains

1 the research methodology. In Section-5, we present data analysis procedure testing and the  
2 analysis of the results. It is followed by the discussion in Section-6 that also includes the  
3 limitations of the study. Finally the paper concludes in Section-7.  
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## 6 7 2. Literature Review: OSS Quality and Usability 8

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10 According to Hansen et al. [6], OSS means that “*the source code is distributed along*  
11 *with the executable program. It is free to use. It includes a license allowing anyone to*  
12 *modify and redistribute the software.*”  
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16 Koch and Neumann [7] explore the influence of different forms of OSS development  
17 processes on the resulting software and verify their effects on different quality  
18 aspects. These authors attempt to ascertain whether different variants of OSS  
19 development processes significantly influence the resulting products. Although OSS  
20 products are ultimately dependent on the skills of the developers, Hedberg et al. [8]  
21 believe that high-quality software can be produced by OSS. By developing an OSS  
22 success model from an existing Information Systems (IS) model, Lee et al. [9]  
23 identify the determinants for OSS success and realize the significance of software  
24 quality on user satisfaction. Furthermore, they recommend that “*usefulness, ease of*  
25 *use, and reliability*” are some of the major factors that OSS practitioners should heed  
26 in order to improve OSS quality.  
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29  
30 Çetin et al. [5] identify users, customers and developers as the major groups involved  
31 in OSS bug reporting. In their empirical study for measuring the success of OSS  
32 projects, Lee et al. [9] also recognize the influence of software quality and user  
33 satisfaction over OSS use. Raza et al. [10] maintain that OSS developers should  
34 consider multiple key usability factors to improve usability of their projects.  
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1 Software usability is a subjective concept, and thus it cannot be directly measured.  
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3 Additionally, many users experience difficulty in reporting usability errors. While  
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5 analyzing OSS usability aspects from industrial users' perspective, Raza et al. [11]  
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7 realize that the popularity of user-centred designs in OSS is increasing, they however  
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9 believe that usability is still not considered as one of the prime objectives in many  
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11 OSS design scenarios. Nichols and Twidale [4] argue that it is challenging for a user  
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13 to describe and hence report the difficulties s/he faces in the Graphical User Interface  
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15 (GUI) of software. Viorres et al. [12] highlight a few potential areas of improvement  
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17 for OSS usability, such as enhancing bug reporting facilities in software, improving  
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19 the analysis of usability errors through the application of HCI principles, and  
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21 supporting argumentation for resolving such issues. Ahmed et al.'s [13] study  
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23 indicates the significance of public forums in managing software defects and  
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25 implementing new in open source projects.  
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28 However, there are several challenges associated with improving the usability of open  
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30 source software. This is despite of the fact that OSS is gaining popularity among  
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32 novice and non technical users. In OSS environment, heavy reliance on voluntary  
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34 mediums such as on-line forums raises many concerns on their effectiveness. In the  
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36 light of different issues as highlighted in the above literature survey, we have set out  
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38 to empirically examine the role of on-line forums in addressing usability related  
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40 issues.  
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### 42 43 44 3. Research Model and Hypotheses 45

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47 The growth in the number of OSS projects and their users has increased tremendously  
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49 in the recent years. In the OSS environment, online forums provide a platform for its  
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51 diverse contributors to communicate and share their development issues. These  
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1 forums play an active role towards managing new features and support requests. Our  
2  
3 aim is to investigate the answer to the following research question:  
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5 *RQ: Do online forums assist in managing usability bugs in OSS projects?*  
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7 The purpose of the research question (RQ) in this study is to analyze the association  
8 between OSS usability bugs identification and fixing and public forums associated  
9 with these projects. In this study, we present a research model for analyzing the  
10 relationship between usability related errors and the online forums of OSS projects.  
11 The theoretical model that will undergo empirical testing is presented in Figure 1. The  
12 research model deals with the association of online forums with software defects, in  
13 particular usability bugs. Messages and mailing lists are the two major forums where  
14 users can report their problems and errors related to different issues. Increase in  
15 messages and mails indicate the interest of people and helps in addressing the  
16 highlighted issues.  
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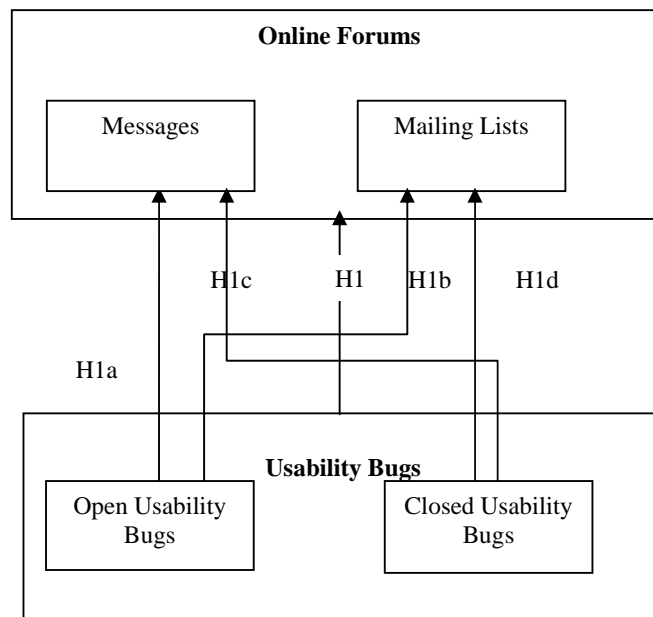


Figure 1: Research Model

1 As indicated in the model (Figure 1), the dependent variables are online forums,  
2 messages and mailing lists, whereas the independent variables are usability bugs, open  
3 usability bugs and closed usability bugs. We would like to state here that the term  
4 “open usability bug” is used as a usability error that has been reported but has not yet  
5 been fixed, whereas “closed usability bug” refers to a usability error that has been  
6 reported and resolved. In order to empirically investigate the RQ, five hypotheses are  
7 presented in Table 1.  
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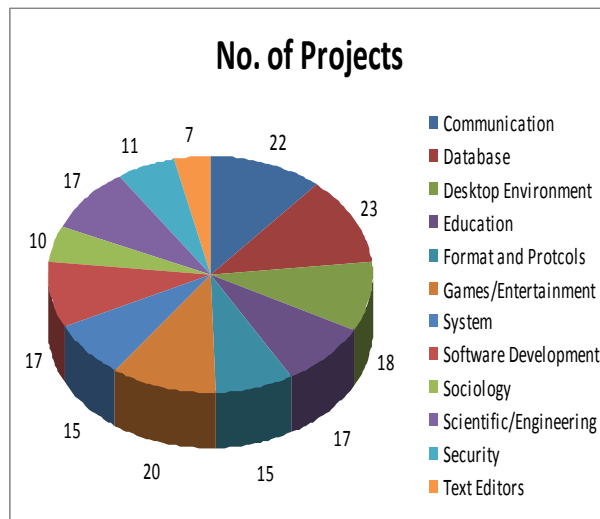
15 **Table 1: Usability Errors Hypotheses**

Hypothesis #	Statement
H1	Public online forums help in identifying and fixing usability errors in OSS projects.
H1a	The open usability bugs are positively related with the number of messages in online forums.
H1b	The open usability bugs are positively related with mailing lists in online forums.
H1c	The closed usability bugs are positively related with the number of messages in online forums.
H1d	The closed usability errors are positively related with mailing lists in online forums.

#### 35 4. Research Methodology

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38 The data for this research study was collected from 1753 projects of a popular open  
39 source software projects repository, sourceforge.net. The dataset covers various  
40 categories of open source software projects such as communication, database,  
41 desktop, education, format & protocols, games & entertainment, scientific &  
42 engineering, security, software development, system and text editor. The first  
43 filtration activity removes the data of all those projects which has either total bugs of  
44 0 or having no online forums. This reduces the dataset to 718 projects. In order to  
45 search for usability related errors, we looked for words such as usability, user, display,  
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run, menu, open, close, extract, zip, unzip, GUI, click, interface, input, output, help, guideline, install, uninstall etc. These words/phrases can be found in Tracker- Bugs summary. We assumed that any summary of the bugs reported/fixed containing these words can be considered as usability related bugs. Similarly for mailing lists, these phrases were searched in "Topic" of mailing lists archives. This filtration further reduced our data set to 192 projects. In the dataset of this study we had communication (22), database (23), desktop (18), education (17), format & protocols (15), games & entertainment (20), system (15), software development (17), sociology (10), scientific & engineering (17), security(11) and text editor (7) projects. Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of the dataset in various categories.



**Figure 2: Pie Chart of Project Categories**

The maximum open bugs were found in the category of database (209). The maximum bugs which have been fixed were observed in a system software project (1156). The category of “software development” has maximum number of mailing lists (07) in one project. The highest number of messages (5611) was found in a sociology project. Figure 3 illustrates the relationship of open and close usability bugs with messages and mailing lists in online forums.



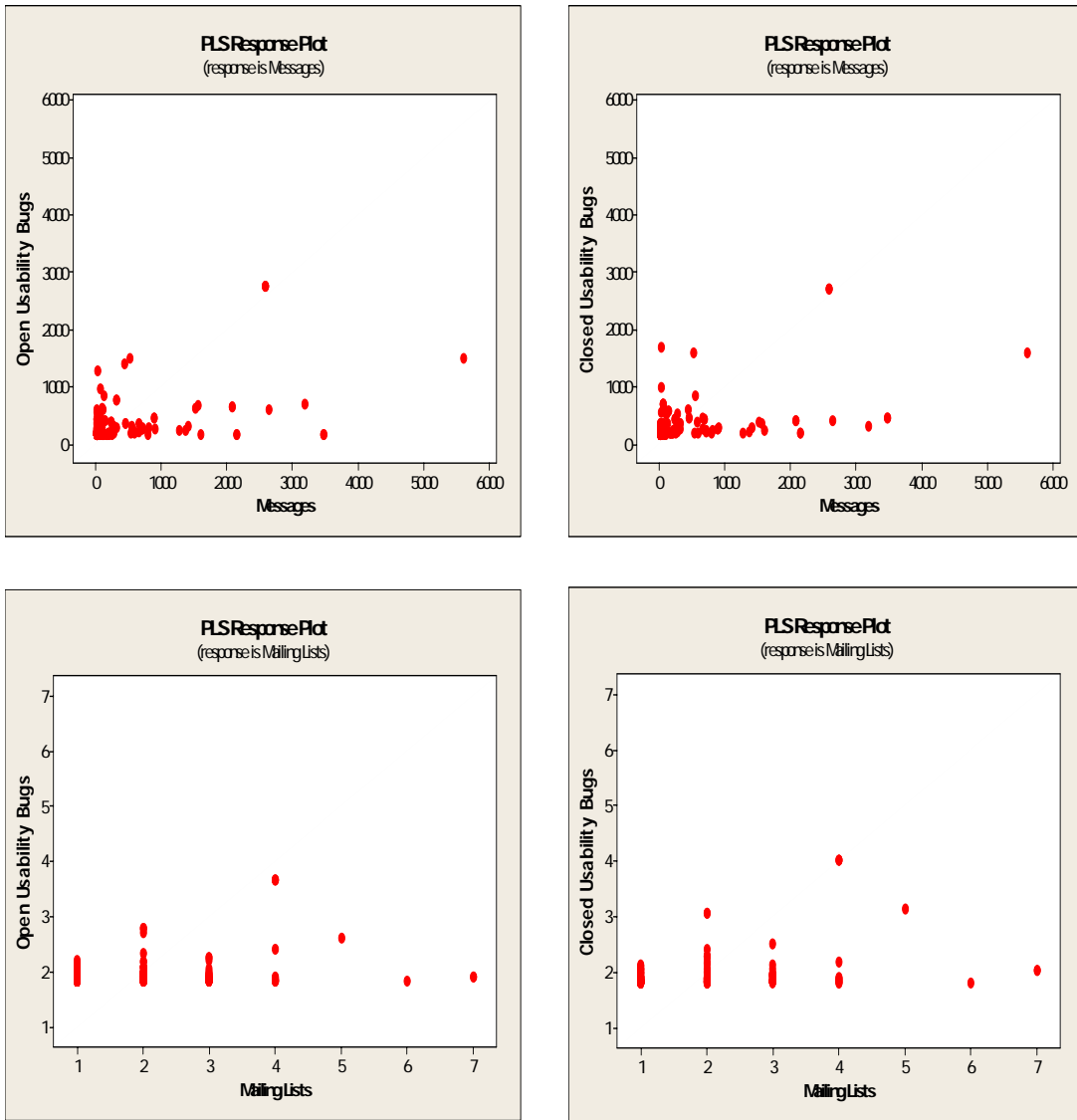


Figure 3: Open/Closed Usability Bugs and Online Forums Support

## 5. Data Analysis Procedure

To analyze the research model and check the significance of hypothesis H1, and its sub-hypotheses H1a, H1b, H1c and H1d, we used various statistical investigation techniques. We divided the data analysis activity into three phases. In Phase I, we conducted tests for the hypotheses using parametric statistics, such as the Pearson correlation coefficient. In Phase II, we utilized non-parametric statistical analysis,

such as the Spearman correlation coefficient. In order to increase the external validity of the study, we used both statistical approaches of parametric and nonparametric methods.

Finally, Phase III entailed testing the hypotheses using the Partial Least Square (PLS) technique. The PLS technique is especially useful in situations involving complexity, non-normal distribution, low theoretical information, and small sample size ([14], [15]). In the PLS testing of hypotheses, we kept one factor as independent and other as dependent variable. We used the PLS technique to increase the reliability of the results. All statistical calculations were performed using Minitab–16 Software.

**Table 2: Empirical Analysis Results**

	Pearson Correlation		Spearman Correlation		Structural Tests	
	Open Usability Bugs	Closed Usability Bugs	Open Usability Bugs	Closed Usability Bugs	Open Usability Bugs	Closed Usability Bugs
<b>Messages</b>	0.495 P=0.0	0.486 P=0.0	0.388 P=0.0	0.488 P=0.0	Coefficient: 0.27 R <sup>2</sup> : 0.245 F-ratio: 61.37 P=0.0	Coefficient: 0.23 R <sup>2</sup> : 0.235 F-ratio: 58.33 P=0.0
<b>Mailing Lists</b>	0.240 P=0.001	0.286 P=0.0	0.218 P=0.001	0.270 P=0.001	Coefficient: 0.23 R <sup>2</sup> : 0.12 F-ratio: 97.15 P=0.001	Coefficient: 0.19 R <sup>2</sup> : 0.18 F-ratio: 16.80 P=0.0

\* Significant at P < 0.01

The Pearson correlation coefficient and t-test were examined between variables involved in the hypotheses H1a, H1b, H1c and H1d. The Pearson correlation coefficient between open usability errors and number of messages in the public

1 forums was positive (0.495) at  $P = 0.0$ , and thus provided a justification to accept the  
2 hypothesis H1a. The hypothesis H1b was accepted based on the Pearson correlation  
3 coefficient (0.240) at  $P = 0.001$ , between open usability bugs and number of mailing  
4 lists in the online forums. The correlation coefficient of 0.486 at  $P = 0.0$  was observed  
5 between the closed usability bugs and number of messages in the online forums, and  
6 hence H1c was accepted. The hypothesis H1d was accepted based on the Pearson  
7 correlation coefficient (0.286) at  $P = 0.0$ , between closed usability bugs and number  
8 of mailing lists in the online forums. Hence, it was observed and is reported here that  
9 hypotheses H1a, H1b, H1c and H1d, were found statistically significant and were  
10 accepted.

11 In order to increase the external validity of the study we conducted non-parametric  
12 statistical technique using Spearman correlation coefficient in Phase-II, to test our  
13 hypotheses. Hypothesis H1a was statistically significant at  $P = 0.0$  with Spearman  
14 correlation coefficient of 0.388. A positive association was observed between open  
15 usability bugs and number of mailing lists (H1b) in the online forums (Spearman:  
16 0.218 at  $P = 0.001$ ). H1c, which deals with the closed usability related errors and  
17 number of messages in the online forums, was also accepted (Spearman: 0.488 at  $P =$   
18 0.0). The Spearman correlation of 0.270 at  $P = 0.001$  was observed for H1d. Hence, it  
19 was observed and is reported here that hypotheses H1a, H1b, H1c and H1d, were  
20 found statistically significant and were accepted.

21 In Phase-III of hypotheses testing, we used the PLS technique to cross validate the  
22 results of Phase-I and Phase-II. We tested the hypotheses H1a, H1b, H1c and H1d, by  
23 examining their direction and significance. The hypothesis involves two variables  
24 therefore in PLS we placed one variable as the response variable and other as the  
25 predicate. Table-2 reports the results of the structural tests of the hypotheses. It

1 contains observed values of path coefficient,  $R^2$  and F-ratio. The path coefficient of  
2 open usability bug (H1a) was found to be 0.27,  $R^2$ : 0.245 and F-ratio (61.37) was  
3 significant at  $P = 0.0$ . Open usability bugs (H1b) had positive path coefficient of 0.23  
4 with  $R^2$ : 0.12 and F-ratio of 97.15 at  $P = 0.001$  with number of mailing lists. Closed  
5 usability bugs with number of messages (H1c) (Path coefficient: 0.23,  $R^2$ : 0.235, F-  
6 ratio: 58.33 at  $P = 0.0$ ) had the same direction as proposed. Close usability bugs and  
7 the mailing lists had path coefficient: 0.19,  $R^2$ : 0.18, F-ratio: 16.80 at  $P = 0.0$ , thus had  
8 the same direction as proposed in H1d. Overall, the hypotheses H1a, H1b, H1c and  
9 H1d, showed significance at  $P < 0.01$  with a positive path coefficients and were in the  
10 same direction as proposed, therefore demonstrates that the hypothesis H1 is accepted.  
11 Hence we concluded that online public forums help in identifying and fixing OSS  
12 usability errors, which provides answer to the RQ.  
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## 26 6. Discussion of Empirical Findings

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28 Due to the involvement of and acceptance by big commercial IT vendors, OSS  
29 products have progressed from a fringe activity to enter into the mainstream [16].  
30 Open source software popularity is increasing every day. OSS users come from all  
31 over the world, differ both in terms of technical experience and cultural background,  
32 and possess unique needs, expectations and demands. This diversity of users makes  
33 usability an increasingly challenging issue for OSS environment. Raza et al. [17]  
34 consider usability learning by OSS developers as an acknowledgement of the usability  
35 problem in open source environment as well as a part of the solution.  
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46 It is evident from our analytical analysis that there is a positive correlation between  
47 the number of open usability bugs reported and the volume of messages posted on  
48 online forums in a particular OSS project. It illustrates the collaboration among OSS  
49 community to test and identify usability errors in a project. The research work  
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1 indicates increase in the volume of interested contributors for projects with unsolved  
2 usability defects. The results of our study also demonstrate the positive correlation  
3 between the number of open usability bugs and number of mailing lists of a given  
4 project highlighting a significant support network of OSS community. This  
5 correlation advocates that the support network OSS community is significant and  
6 active. The voluntary nature of mailing list members in the collaborative environment  
7 of OSS generally leads to identification of possible solutions as well.  
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11 Furthermore, our empirical investigation supports the correlation between the volume  
12 of fixed usability bugs and the number of messages in the online forums. This may be  
13 considered another evidence of OSS community's collaborative support network  
14 which assists in the fixing of usability relate defects. Similar correlation has also been  
15 observed between the volume of users in the mailing list and the number of closed  
16 usability defects. This is because the number of active mailing lists is positively  
17 correlated to the number of usability bugs which have been resolved. Our analysis,  
18 thus, clearly highlight the involvement of OSS contributors, that may include users,  
19 developers, testers, architects and designers, in the identification and consequent  
20 fixing of usability errors in OSS projects.  
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## 38 6.1 Limitations of the Study & Threats to External Validity

39 Empirical studies are always subject to certain limitations, and although we performed  
40 a number of measures to reduce the threats to external validity and increase the  
41 reliability, there are still some limitations to this study.  
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45 According to Easterbrooks et al. [18], construct validity, internal validity, external  
46 validity and reliability are four criteria of validity in an empirical study. Wohlin et al.  
47 [19] observe that in most cases, the researcher's ability to generalize the experimental  
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1 results to industrial practice is limited by threats to external validity. We took specific  
2 measures to support external validity, including our use of a random sampling  
3 technique. Additionally, we retrieved data from the most active and well-known OSS  
4 reporting website, sourceforge.net, which includes a large number of projects.  
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9 The increased popularity of empirical methodology in software engineering has also  
10 raised concerns of an ethical nature ([20], [21]). The data repository we used in this  
11 study is a non-profit organization. Our study adhered to the recommended ethical  
12 principles to ensure that the empirical investigation would not violate any of the  
13 recommended experimental ethics.  
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18 Another aspect of validity is concerned with whether or not the study reports results  
19 that correspond to previous findings. This study strengthens the discernment that the  
20 OSS is getting popular and that its development life cycle relies heavily on online  
21 forums.  
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26 Another limitation of this study is its relatively small sample size. Although we  
27 started with a dataset of 1753 open source software projects, covering a broad range  
28 of categories, two filtration activities reduced our data set to 192 projects (refer to  
29 Section 4).  
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34 Although the proposed approach has some potential to threaten external validity, we  
35 followed appropriate research procedures by conducting and reporting tests to  
36 improve the reliability and validity of the study, and certain measures were also taken  
37 to ensure the external validity.  
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42 It is worth mentioning here that other collaborative techniques such as blogs, wikis  
43 and twikis are also being used in OSS world. Although they play part in identifying  
44 and fixing usability bugs in OSS projects too, this study was primarily focused on the  
45 roles of messages and mailing lists. We are currently carrying out a comparative study  
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1 of different collaborative techniques used to address perceptive and cognitive issues in  
2  
3 OSS.  
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## 5 6 7. Conclusion

8 Addressing users' requirements is one of the major challenging options for improving  
9 usability in OSS. The objective of this study was to empirically analyze the  
10 association between usability defects in OSS and support through online public  
11 forums. The empirical results of this study strongly support the hypotheses that public  
12 online forums help in identifying and fixing usability errors in OSS projects. The  
13 study further helps in understanding the significant role of online forums in OSS  
14 development. However, as presented in our study, in only 10.95% (192 out of 1753)  
15 of the studied projects, usability related issues have been highlighted. We would also  
16 like to mention that this research was first of its kind, in which we studied the role of  
17 online forums in relation to usability errors in OSS projects. Although it is very much  
18 possible to get different results with different source and number of OSS projects, it is  
19 nevertheless stressed that the level of usability and its related issues need to be  
20 addressed more thoroughly in OSS projects.  
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