A Manual Categorization of Android App Development Issues on Stack Overflow

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Abstract—While many tutorials, code examples, and documentation about Android APIs exist, developers still face various problems with the implementation of Android Apps. Many of these issues are discussed on Q&A-sites, such as Stack Overflow. In this paper we present a manual categorization of 450 Android related posts of Stack Overflow concerning their question and problem types. The idea is to find dependencies between certain problems and question types to get better insights into issues of Android App development. The categorization is developed using card sorting with three experienced Android App developers. An initial approach to automate the classification of Stack Overflow posts using Lucene is also presented. The study highlights that the most common question types are 'How to…?' and 'What is the problem…?' The problems that are discussed most often are related to 'User Interface' and 'Core Elements'. In particular, the problem category 'Layout' is often related to 'What is the problem…?' and 'Frameworks'-issues often come with 'Is it possible…?'-questions.

I. INTRODUCTION

The discussion of issues related to the development of mobile applications (apps) has gained more and more popularity on Q&A-platforms such as Stack Overflow. Barua et al. [1] stated that Android is among the topics with the largest increase in the number of posts on Stack Overflow. The success of a mobile application depends on the quality of the application. Lineares-Vasquez et al. [5] found that there is a dependency between the quality of an API and the success of the mobile app that uses this API. The APIs used by successful apps use less fault-prone APIs than those used by unsuccessful apps.

Although there are many tutorials, a lot of documentation and several examples on how to develop mobile applications, developers often have problems and questions concerning their implementation. The goal of this research is to give recommendations to developers to improve the quality of mobile applications and to minimize the amount of problems during development. As a first step in this research, we need to find out what the main problems and topics of Android app developers are.

We manually investigated 450 Android related posts of Stack Overflow to get information about the main issues of Android development. In particular, we used Card Sorting to categorize posts concerning the issues stated in the post and the kind of question that is asked. We refined the categories iteratively and evaluated them with three experienced Android app developers. We then manually analyzed the categories and posts to answer the following two research questions:

RQ1 What are the main issues discussed on Stack Overflow concerning mobile app development for Android OS?
- What kind of questions are asked?
- What problems are discussed?

RQ2 What are the relations between question categories and problem categories?

Furthermore, we used the classified posts to train a model with Apache Lucene's implementation of kNN (k-nearest-neighbours)-algorithm in order to perform this classification automatically. With this, we seek to answer our third research question:

RQ3 To which extent can we automate the classification of Stack Overflow posts with Apache Lucene?

In this paper, we make the following contributions:

- A qualitative evaluation of Android development issues concerning the main problem and question categories.
- An evaluation of the dependencies between the problems and question categories of posts.
- A manually created benchmark for Android-related post classification.
- An initial evaluation of Apache Lucene’s kNN algorithm to automate the classification.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. In Section III we describe the extraction and manual categorization of posts. Furthermore, we present the answers to the research questions RQ1 and RQ2. Section IV presents the automated classification with Apache Lucene and answer to research question RQ3. Threats to validity are discussed in Section V. We present conclusions and directions for future work in Section VI.

II. RELATED WORK

During the last years several studies on topic modeling of Stack Overflow posts have been presented. The three approaches closest to this study are from Lineares-Vasquez et

1http://stackoverflow.com/
al. [6], Barua et al. [1], and Treude et al. [9]. Linares-Vasquez et al. [6] applied LDA (Latent Dirichlet Allocation) to identify the hot topics of mobile app development discussed on Stack Overflow. They focused on finding out which questions are answered and which ones are not. Barua et al. [1] had a closer look at the topics that are discussed on Stack Overflow posts to get more insights into the problems faced by developers. They used MALLET’s implementation of LDA to infer topics from posts and investigated how these topics evolved over time. In [9], Treude et al. presented a classification of Stack Overflow posts into question categories, such as ‘how to’ or ‘error’. They focused on investigating the research questions which posts are answered immediately and why, as well as who are the questioners.

Further approaches to get insights into issues of Android app development are presented in [3] and [7]. Han et al. [3] examined bug reports in order to get topics of vendor specific bugs of Android apps. Similar to Barua et al. [1] they used LDA to infer topics and observed their evolution over time. Martie et al. [7] used LDA to examine Android bug XML logs of open source projects. They analyzed topic trends and distribution over time and releases.

Similar to our approach, Guzzi et al. [2] applied Card Sorting for the categorization of posts on mailing lists. They evaluated their categories with Closed Card Sorting and calculated the Fleiss’Kappa-value to get inter-rater agreement. Other approaches such as [4] of Joorabchi et al. also discuss the challenges of mobile app development.

In this research, we also analyze Stack Overflow posts. However, we focus on posts related to Android app development. For the categorization of the posts we use card sorting instead of automated approaches, such as LDA. We furthermore differ from related studies in investigating the dependencies between question and problem categories to get better insights into the issues of Android app development.

III. MANUAL CATEGORIZATION

In the following we report how we extracted the data from the Stack Exchange website and which data we selected for the categorization. Furthermore, the categorization of the posts into question types and problem types is presented. Figure 2 shows an overview of the study’s design.

Data Extraction: We examined 550 of 130764 Stack Overflow posts that are related to get insights into questions and problems of Android app development. The data for examination are provided by the Stack Exchange website.2 We chose the posts of Stack Overflow since these posts focus on app development. Stack Overflow has also been used in previous studies, such as [6], [1], and [9].

At first we downloaded the Stack Overflow’s data dump in XML format from November 2013. Posts are stored in the file Posts.xml that we imported into a MySQL database. We used the fields Id, Body, Title and Tags for the study. To get rid of unimportant information we filtered HTML-specific tags during import. The next step was to select Android related posts, meaning posts that are tagged with <android>. Only question-posts are used. We also filtered posts that are tagged with <eclipse> since they refer to issues with the IDE. Since we wanted information about the last hot topics of Android app development, we selected posts with Id > 9000000, meaning posts created after January 2012. From this set of posts, we finally selected the 550 most viewed posts. Not all of the posts are related to Android development. They also concerned hardware issues or environment specific topics as well. Therefore, we only selected posts that deal with the implementation of Android apps, resulting in 450 posts.

Categorization: We applied Card Sorting to build categories of problems and questions. Card Sorting is used to structure information and evaluate categories [8]. Each post is categorized two times: first concerning the question type, second concerning the component that causes the problem.

To build the problem categories, we investigated which class or method of the API causes the problem. If there has already been a category with this class or method, the post was assigned to this category. Otherwise, a new category named after the component (API method or class) has been created. If there were only a few posts in a category, we combined related categories to one bigger category. Categories, named after methods of one class were combined to a category named after the class. Classes of the same Android API package were also combined to a category, named after this package. If the amount of posts in a category was very high compared to other categories, the category was split.

We present below how to distinguish between the question categories to get more insights into the reasons of the problems:

2http://data.stackexchange.com
Posts of the category *How to...?* describe issues where the questioner does not know how to implement it. The questioner often asks how to integrate a given solution into her own code or asks for examples.

Posts of the category *What is the problem...?* deal with problems where the questioner has an idea how to solve it, but was not able to implement it correctly. The posts often contain *How to...?* questions, for which there is no working solution.

Posts of the category *Error...?* describe the occurrence of errors, exceptions, crashes or even compiler errors. All posts in this category contain a stack trace, error message, or warning.

Posts of the category *Is it possible...?* contain questions to get more information about the possibilities and limitations of Android apps or several APIs.

Posts of the category *Why...?* focus on obtaining background information on a component or life cycle. The questioner asks for explanation and understanding.

Posts of the category *Better Solution...?* contain questions for better solutions or best practice solutions. Typically, the questioner already has an unsatisfactory solution for the problem.

Posts of the category *Version...?* deal with problems that occur when changing the API level. Furthermore, this category contains posts that deal with the compatibility of API versions.

Posts of the category *Device...?* deal with problems that occur exclusively on specific devices. For instance, the settings and API level are the same for two devices but the problem occurs only on one device.

Since a post can contain multiple questions we applied the following rules for the categorization:

1) The first question is taken for the categorization.

2) If there are more versions of the question, or an ‘evolution’ of the question, the question of the first version is considered for categorization.

3) *Version...?* comes before *Device...?*.

4) *Version...?* and *Device...?* come before *How to...?* or *What is the problem...?*

5) *Is it possible...?* comes before *How to...?*

We developed the categories in an iterative manner, as shown by the *Refinement* step in Figure 2. The result of the initial categorization was evaluated by one experienced Android developer using 35 posts selected randomly from the 450 posts. Regarding the question categories, she agreed for 12 out of the 35 posts. Regarding the problem categories the agreement was 9 out of 35. Based on her feedback we refined and refactored the categories. In particular, we added super categories for related line grained problems, that we call *main problem categories*.

To verify the refined categories we applied *Closed Card Sorting* with three Android developers (ADs). Each has 2 or more years of experience in developing Android apps. Each developer classified 35 posts into question and problem categories. The sample of 35 posts from different problem categories was randomly chosen from the set of 450 posts. We gave each developer a written description of the categories and how to distinguish them.

We compared the classification of the posts of the test persons with ours. Then we reviewed the posts where no AD agreed with our classification. Furthermore, we reviewed posts that all three ADs assigned the same category but which was different to ours. These categories were *Layout, Gestures, EventHandling* and *Intent*. The developers reported that they had difficulties to differ between the question categories *Better Solution* and *Why...?*, and to distinguish between the problem categories *Layout, Form Widgets, and Composite*.

After the last refinement, the three ADs classified on average 72% of the posts according to our question categories. Regarding the main problem categories the agreement was on average 79%. Regarding the problem categories the agreement was on average 70%. We also calculated Fleiss’ Kappa to measure the inter-rater agreement. For the question categories we got \( \kappa_{qc} = 0.60 \) (i.e., moderate agreement), for the main problem categories we achieved \( \kappa_{mp} = 0.71 \) (i.e., substantial agreement) and for the problem categories Fleiss’ Kappa value was \( \kappa_{fmp} = 0.66 \) (i.e., substantial agreement).

The final categorization resulted in 8 question categories, 15 main problem categories, and 45 problem categories. The CSV-file containing the posts and categories is provided on our website.3 In the following we discuss the results and present the answers to the research questions RQ1 (i.e., RQ1.1 and RQ1.2) and RQ2.

RQ1.1 *What kind of questions are asked?*

The details of posts per question category are presented in Table I. The table shows that the most frequent type of question was *How to...?* (31.78%). This corresponds to the results of Treude et al. [9]. This category is followed by questions about *What is the Problem...?* (28.00%) and *Error...?* (12.00%).

We conclude that the main part of the questions is about the usage of components (*How to...?*) or how to interpret and deal with problems and errors (*What is the Problem...?, Error...?*). Other question categories are *Is it possible...?, Why...?, Better Solution...?, Version...?, and Device...?*. 

RQ1.2 *What problems are discussed?*

Table II shows the most frequent categories of problems discussed in posts on Stack Overflow. These are related to User Interface issues (25.78%) followed by posts of the categories Core Elements (12.44%) and Libs/APIs (11.78%).

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3http://serg.aau.at/pub/StefanieBeyer/Research/posts_and_categories.csv

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question Category</th>
<th>Posts</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How to...?</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>31.78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the problem...?</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>28.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error...?</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>12.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is it possible...?</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>10.22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why...?</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>6.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better Solution...?</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>5.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Version...?</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>5.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Device...?</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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TABLE II: Main Problem Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Problem Category</th>
<th>Posts</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>User Interface</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>25.78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Core Elements</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>12.44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libs/APIs</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>11.78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Android System</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>7.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Input</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>7.11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Webkit</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>5.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>5.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Database</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>5.11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Networking</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>5.11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (Graphics, OS, Security, Threading,...)</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>14.44%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From these results we conclude that many problems that arise during Android app development are User Interface related. The issues of the category Core Elements which includes the core elements of an Android app cause problems, too. Questions about Libs/APIs are also discussed frequently. Fewer questions are related to the problems of components of Android Systems, Input, Webkit, Media, Database, and Networking.

**RQ2 What are the relations between question categories and problem categories?**

Table III shows the relations between question categories and main problem categories and important problem categories.

According to the results of research question RQ1.1, posts are most often related to the question categories How to...? and What is the problem...? These question categories are strongly related to the main problem categories User Interface, Core Elements, Libs/APIs, Android System, Input, Webkit, Media, Database, and Networking. The problem categories Layout, Form Widget, Composite, Frameworks, Emulator, and Gestures confirm this conclusion. We conclude that there are problems with the implementation and usage of these components.

Questions of the category Error...? are connected to the components of the main problem categories Network and Database. Furthermore, the problem category Fragments is related to the question category Error...?. The relation of the problem category Fragments to the question category Why...? indicates that developers ask for more explanation and understanding of this component. Developers do not have a full understanding of the components of the category Core Elements. They ask for better ways and reasons. Furthermore, problems depending on the API version occur at application components.

Questions, such as Is it possible...? are related to the main problem category Libs/APIs and problem category Layout. The study highlights that developers often ask which Frameworks they should choose and if it is possible to implement their ideas with certain APIs. Developers want to know more about the possibilities to design the Layout components of Android.

The relation between Webkit and Version...? indicates that there are troubles with new versions of the Android API. Version changes are also the reason for troubles of the problem category ActionBar.

**IV. CLASSIFICATION WITH APACHE LUCENE**

The next step was to investigate automated classification of posts into the different question and problem categories using Apache Lucene, an open-source search library.

We first preprocessed the text by running the Porter stemming algorithm to cut off common word suffixes. We applied EnglishPossessiveFilter to remove possessives from words and ASCIIIFoldingFilter to special characters that are not in the ASCII range to the most similar ASCII characters. We converted the text to lower case and used StopFilter to remove English stopwords.

For the classification we used Apache Lucene’s implementation of the k-nearest-neighbours algorithm. We applied 10-fold-cross validation to ensure to get valid results. The sample of 450 posts is randomly partitioned into 10 equal sized subsamples. 9 subsamples are used for training the classifier and the remaining subsample is used for testing. The classification is performed 10 times each time with a different subsample as test-set. The average precision of the ten runs of the classification of question category, main-problem category and problem category is taken for the evaluation.

We repeated this experiment 45 times with $k$ increasing from 1 to 45. The results show that $k = 41$ fits best for the classification of posts concerning the question categories. For the classification of posts into the main-problem categories $k = 18$ achieves the best results. For problem categorization the setting $k = 26$ obtains the best results. In the following we discuss these results and answer research question RQ3.

**RQ3 To which extent can we automate the classification of Stack Overflow posts with Apache Lucene?**

Figure 2 shows the results obtained by using Apache Lucene’s kNN for classifying posts into our question, main problem, and problem categories. It furthermore compares the

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4http://lucene.apache.org
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Analyzing the questions and problems we found that developers mainly have problems with the usage of API components, such as User Interface and Core Elements. Developers also ask if the realization of their ideas is possible with Libs/APIs and User Interface components. Errors are often mentioned in questions related to Network, Database, and Fragments. Furthermore, version changes cause problems in the components Webkit and ActionBar. Based on our categorization we then investigated to which extent the classification of posts can be automated with Apache Lucene’s kNN algorithm. While the classification obtained with Lucene significantly outperformed the baseline, it needs to be improved.

In future work we first will expand this study by an investigation of more Android related posts on Stack Overflow. We also will compare our manual categorization with categorizations obtained through IR-techniques, such as LDA and LSI (Latent Semantic Indexing). We will use these techniques to also improve the automated classification of posts. Based on the categorization, we then plan to investigate the evolution of questions and problems discussed on Stack Overflow.

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