



Thread Deep dive

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Background & Top-level Results

About this Research

Background

Q&A and Answers are web-based platforms that aim to provide a variety of users with access to a multitude of support for commercial tools, systems, and services. Recently an initiative was launched aiming to build a unified support community platform across . A prior study investigated user interactions with searching, asking a question, and reviewing a question. After this research was concluded, it was decided a deep dive into the existing Q&A thread experience is needed to make more granular and refined design recommendations to ensure the first version meets user expectations. This research aims to gather feedback on the current Q&A thread experience, as well as comparing the experience to other popular community support platforms (i.e., Reddit, Stack Overflow, and Apple). The data collected from this study will help inform the development of an intuitive thread prototype for the support community platform.

Key Questions

- Does the layout of comments and answers in Q&A cause confusion for users who are looking for a solution and/or providing an answer?
- If the thread doesn't provide a sufficient answer to a user's question, where do they go to seek an answer?
- What are users' expectations when engaging with thread history?
- Is there value in viewing the content in the way it is currently organized/presented or do users prefer a simpler solution?
- What features/functions do users find value in that aren't present in a Q&A thread?
- When compared to other prominent support platform thread pages, how does Q&A compare?

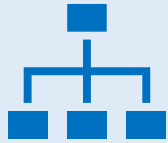
Participants

10 user from both platforms:

- 5 Answers
- 5 Q&A

Method

- 1:1 remote interviews/ tool walkthrough
- 45 - 60 minutes in length
- During the interviews users were shown a Q&A thread and performed lightweight tasks to capture user sentiment.
- Users were also shown other popular community support site such as Reddit, Apple, and Stack Overflow to compare to Q&A.



Organization

- Users' primary objective is to find a solution to their inquiry, so they expect the **accepted answer or answers** to be prominently displayed at the **top of the thread**.
- Users' mental model regarding threads involves **organizing comments and answers** in a manner that is relevant, helpful, and **easily accessible**.



Structure

- In threads with a lot of content, users **prioritize readability** to avoid spending **unnecessary time** and **cognitive effort scrolling** through each comment or answer.
- Users anticipate a **seamless** thread experience where they can easily distinguish between **responding** to the post, **replying** to a comment, or **providing** an answer.

Interactions

- Users seek **clear visual indicators** to **distinguish moderators, contributors, and original posters** when viewing thread content, enhancing their understanding of the ongoing discussion.
- Being able to **reply directly to or tag others** are actions that users expect to take when reviewing thread content.
- If users wish to **continue searching** within Q&A or **pose a new question** these options should be **readily accessible** without requiring them to **scroll** back to the top.

Key Themes/ Findings

1. **Q&A was ranked the highest when compared to Apple, Stack Overflow, and Reddit:** Throughout their experience, most users viewed Q&A as having a less cluttered UI, appreciated its ad-free environment, and considered it a credible site for finding solutions.
2. **User confusion correlates directly to the density of the thread content:** Users struggled to locate the appropriate places to enter comments and answers due to the sheer amount of content that can be available on a thread. Users also reported seeing inconsistent usage of the response options i.e., comments as answers and answers as comments.
3. **The design of the Q&A thread page does not optimize the use of visual space making it less conducive for quick scanning, engagement, and content digestion:** While users appreciate Q&A's less cluttered interface compared to other platforms, navigating through information in dense threads can lead to user confusion in determining what is relevant and what is noise.
4. **There is a disconnect between users' mental models of what they expect to see on a thread page and the actual content layout, this prompts them to seek sorting options to better organize and structure the thread:** Users associate providing a thumbs up as a way to endorse or elevate the status of a comment. Many users inquired about sorting comments by thumbs up count, expressing disappointment upon discovering this feature was unavailable.
5. **Comments dominate thread space, thereby minimizing the ability for users to quickly scan and find thread content:** Users suggested that reducing padding around comments and expanding them into available white space could potentially make it easier to skim through, especially in content heavy threads.
6. **Users expect the 'Accepted answer' to be surfaced to the top of the thread, eliminating the need for extensive scrolling to locate it:** Users expressed frustration over the need to scroll so far down the page, as they aim to quickly find a solution and resume their work. In instances where there is no accepted answer, users expect to see the next best non-accepted answers surfaced first.

Detailed Findings & Recommendations



Finding an answer

Users unanimously agreed the accepted answer should be prominently surfaced after the question to enhance visibility and efficiency in finding solutions

- Users expect the solution to be pinned or surfaced to the top of the thread, enabling them to quickly locate their answer without needing to scroll through multiple comments.
- The bright green design of the 'Accepted answer' is valuable to users, as it allows for quick identification of potential solutions upon arriving on a thread.
- Users find value in the ability to comment within the accepted answer because it enables them to offer feedback, pose questions, or suggest alternative solutions.

Recommendations

- Explore thread designs which surface or pin the accepted answer to the top of the thread.

"The answer should be prominent on the page." – P1



"The accepted answer I would have preferred to be on the top or above the comments." – P12



It is valuable to have the accepted answer pop up first, just because sometimes it's just more efficient to get straight to the correct answer to fix the issue." – P2



"I'll probably have to skim through all this, but I think if the answers were maybe at the top, that might have been helpful probably. I would say in terms of order the accepted answer I would have preferred to be on the top." – P11



Users expressed the importance of featuring multiple accepted answers, believing it would enhance their understanding and provide a comprehensive view of possible solutions

- Users stated that there is value in allowing for various roles to mark replies as correct given that there can often be multiple correct answers to one question. This finding surfaced in previous work.
- Additionally, there is no one size fits all answer for most problems and users find value in seeing what has worked for the OP (original poster) and community members.
- One participant emphasized the importance of ensuring accepted answers remain up-to-date. Another raised questions about who would be responsible for validating multiple solutions.

Recommendations

- Explore engineering and design solutions that would showcase multiple 'correct' answers to a single thread.

"If both [accepted answers] end up with the same result, then I would be happy for them to both be accepted answers. – P2



"I think it's applicable again kind of like depends given the fact that we can have different browsers, we can have different operating systems." – P12



"If I have a question, maybe not even a verified person from can give the solution. Maybe someone else is knowledgeable enough to maybe give a solution to a problem that you're facing" – P3



Allowing different roles to mark answers on a thread as correct was considered critical to maintaining thread health

- Users suggested that allowing different roles to 'rate' or 'mark' responses on a post as accepted or verified would enhance the thread's quality and ensure timely acceptance, contributing to ongoing thread health. This finding surfaced in previous work.
- These users expressed that in many cases the original poster (OP) may not return to the thread once the answer is received which leaves the post unanswered degrading the thread quality and the community.
- A couple of users proposed accepted answers should be community-driven, where the response with the highest number of helpful votes is chosen as the accepted answer.

Recommendations

- Consider allowing multiple roles to mark responses as verified or correct on a single post.
- Explore design solutions that would clearly identify the difference between the OP and moderator answers on a thread.

"That's why I think long term community members should also be able to accept answers and possibly after the original poster has accepted an answer, they could accept additional answers or if the OP doesn't accept one for like a week maybe they can come back and accept it." – P4



"The moderator should be able to select like, OK, this is an accepted answer because based on the feedback from other people this actually worked" – P6



"I feel like it should be open so that not only me can try the solution that you guys [MSFT] have offered, but also if other people can be able to try and if it works really good, they too are able to mark it as an accepted answer." – P3



"[Marking an accepted answer] I would say community driven is great, especially if they upvoted it right and agree with that or say they have the same problem, and this helped them solve it. But also if it is like a driven one, the moderators, if they do it, that's fine too." – P12



The 'Sort by' menu's low placement on a thread causes users to easily overlook it when seeking to sort content

- When multiple comments are present on a post, users often need to scroll extensively to locate the answer(s) and sorting menu. This contradicts users' mental model and is an effectively invisible trap, as they expect answers and any sorting options to be positioned at the top and easily accessible.
- All users found the options in the 'Sort by' menu to be intuitive and appreciated the default setting was 'Most helpful' which aligned with their expectations.

Yeah, I would sort by newest or most helpful. I guess I do like actually that the default is on most helpful, but my next option would be to click on newest. These are the options I'd expect to find. - P2



"Ohh, probably next to where it says like 6 comments, that that that would be ideal area for a sort by type menu." - P12



Recommendations

- Consider design and engineering solutions to elevate the sorting menu to a more prominent position on the page, ensuring its visibility and accessibility.

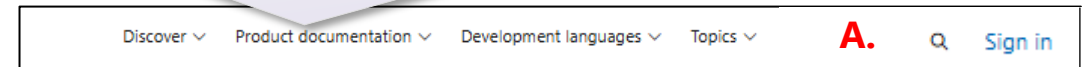
If users don't find a solution quickly and easily on the thread, they will revert to their search engine

- Accessibility to blogs, and other community forums are a few reasons why users will not stay within the Q&A platform if the thread does not answer their question.
- While users acknowledged they might not use the Q&A search function they emphasized the importance of keeping the top navigation and search bar [A] sticky, similar to Stack Overflow and Apple, for easy access.
- A couple of users indicated they would consider using the 'Ask a question' feature if their issue was specific to .

Recommendations

- Consider exploring the idea of making the top navigation sticky to help mitigate bounce rate from the site.

"Maybe it's something that could be improved on Q&A as I think it's one positive thing on Stack Overflow. Keep the search and navigation bar on the top as we scroll the page." –P5



Q&A: Top Navigation bar

"I will try another platform and another way to search for this error, maybe another platform like Stack Overflow or Redditt. – P5



"If it's not the right thread for me to kind of contribute and start off something else. So I might try to find more answers out there from the Internet. – P11



"If the page doesn't have the answers, then I will continue to search the question that I have on Google and sometimes there is blog posts by other technologists or Reddit posts that also detail the issue. And I look at those and see if those have the solution." – P2





Thread Comments

Threads with substantial content often resulted in increased user confusion, as they struggled to determine where to respond or contribute answers

- Some users encountered difficulty navigating to the section where they could comment on the original question, often scrolling past it before eventually finding it. Some users also inquired about a more direct way to reply to comments without having to scroll to the end the chain to do so.
- When asked where to go to provide an answer to the post, some assumed they could answer it by posting a comment and others needed guidance to locate the 'Answer' box since they were unaware it was located at the bottom of the thread.
- Some users expressed the need for the answer box option to be more readily accessible, rather than requiring them to scroll to the bottom of the page to locate it.

Recommendations

- Consider including clear guidelines or instructions on when to use comments versus answers to reduce ambiguity.
- Explore design solutions that improve the visibility and accessibility of the 'Answer' box within the thread.
- Consider design and engineering solutions to allow users to reply directly to a comment.

"There's a lot of comments on it as opposed to answers because people use comments as answers. People also use the answers as comments a lot of the time, so I see that these are comments and these are answers. And sometimes every response is a comment." – P2



"Yeah, so what I'm saying is that having two sections, answers and comments, might be a bit confusing. A single flow without any separations for sections for answers and a section for comments I think that might be clearer as well." – P12



"These are also answers, but that's a bit confusing for me because these are, well, these are comments, I guess. Does the page have a way to mark when, somebody's responding to this question? Does the page have a way to for the responder to mark it as the answer because I see some comments here. Just by looking at it I don't know whether that's actually an answer or not." – P11



The ability to upvote a comment is prompting users to seek sorting options to better organize and structure the page

- Users expect the thread to surface or prioritize comments that have received significant attention (e.g., thumbs up) from the community to guide them towards the most valuable content.
- Many users tried to find a way to sort the comments on the thread, assuming that if they could upvote them, sorting would be possible.

Recommendations

- Explore design and engineering solutions that enable users to organize and structure the thread content.

"It's a bit of a mystery how they're [comments] organized like that section right under the question I see that the first two comments they each have one vote and then it's followed by a few that have zero votes. They're also not an option to like, sort them by or filter by and so it just shows a lot of info and then we only see the accepted answer and then we see more answers that are not considered accepted answers, but rather additional answers. It's just a lot on the same page and a lot of scrolling, so I personally do a lot of control F and search." – P12



"And I would expect to see a pinned comment of some kind or most upvoted comment, but I don't see one there [under original post]. –P4



"I think when someone comments like on an issue that they're having and multiple people upvoted, this ups the relevancy of the comments so if someone from the product or engineering team sees this issue, they're like OK, this is a very important issue and we need to go solve this." –P2



"Let me ask, when you have the filter here, will it be filtering all the comments or is it just for the additional answer?" – P3



Although comments are visually appealing, users expressed they are not presented in a way that is relevant or easily digestible resulting in increased cognitive load and time on the thread

- Although users noted comments can be valuable, many times they feel comments are irrelevant, take up too much space, are not easy to scan.
- Several users reported having to scan irrelevant content such a comments that say "Thanks" or "This worked!"
- When reviewing thread content on other platforms it was noted comments were either condensed or nested which made it easier to skim through.

Recommendations

- Explore engineering and design solutions that structures the comments in a more condensed and easier to scan format.

"You know spam can happen. So yeah, so I'm worried about. Like if there's too much irrelevant or unhelpful answers, how can I find the helpful answer in in in them?" – P1



"See, when the comment is useful, we can keep the comment, otherwise it should be deleted because it's not correlated to the question." – P9



"It's just that if the comments like pile up, like if there's a lot of comments, I will be unable to find what I'm looking for." – P6



"Something like stack overflows, condensed comments, or when I use Reddit or discord for example, I'll often set it to be condensed, so you can skim over it quicker to look for keywords, or information you're looking for." – P4



When tagging active contributors on a thread user expect the system to suggest relevant primary users (OP, other commenters, moderators)

- Some users anticipated when tagging someone in the thread the system would prioritize displaying the names of the original poster and other users who had already commented or provided an answer.
- Many view tagging as essential in threads because they expect the system to promptly notify others within the thread about matters needing attention.
- Additionally, a couple of users felt it wasn't clear tagging is available until they attempt to use it themselves.

Recommendations

- Explore engineering solutions to refine tagging functionality and ensure consistency in the activity log.
- Consider adding instructional text informing users they can tag others within the thread.

"Yeah, I'd like tag someone in the comments or someone that isn't in the thread to bring it to their attention or reply to them and have an easy way for them to be notified of my answer." – P2



"When I try to comment on someone's answer and I try to @mention [tag], the drop-down list shows me irrelevant people. And I think it should prefer those users that are relevant in the thread like the one [OP] I'm replying to." –P4





Platform Comparisons:

Q&A vs. Stack Overflow, Apple, & Reddit

At the end of the interview, participants ranked the overall UI of the four platforms from one to four, with one being their most preferred and four their least preferred. Threads were live environments and not screenshots. Users were only asked to provide feedback about the thread and their only interaction was scrolling.

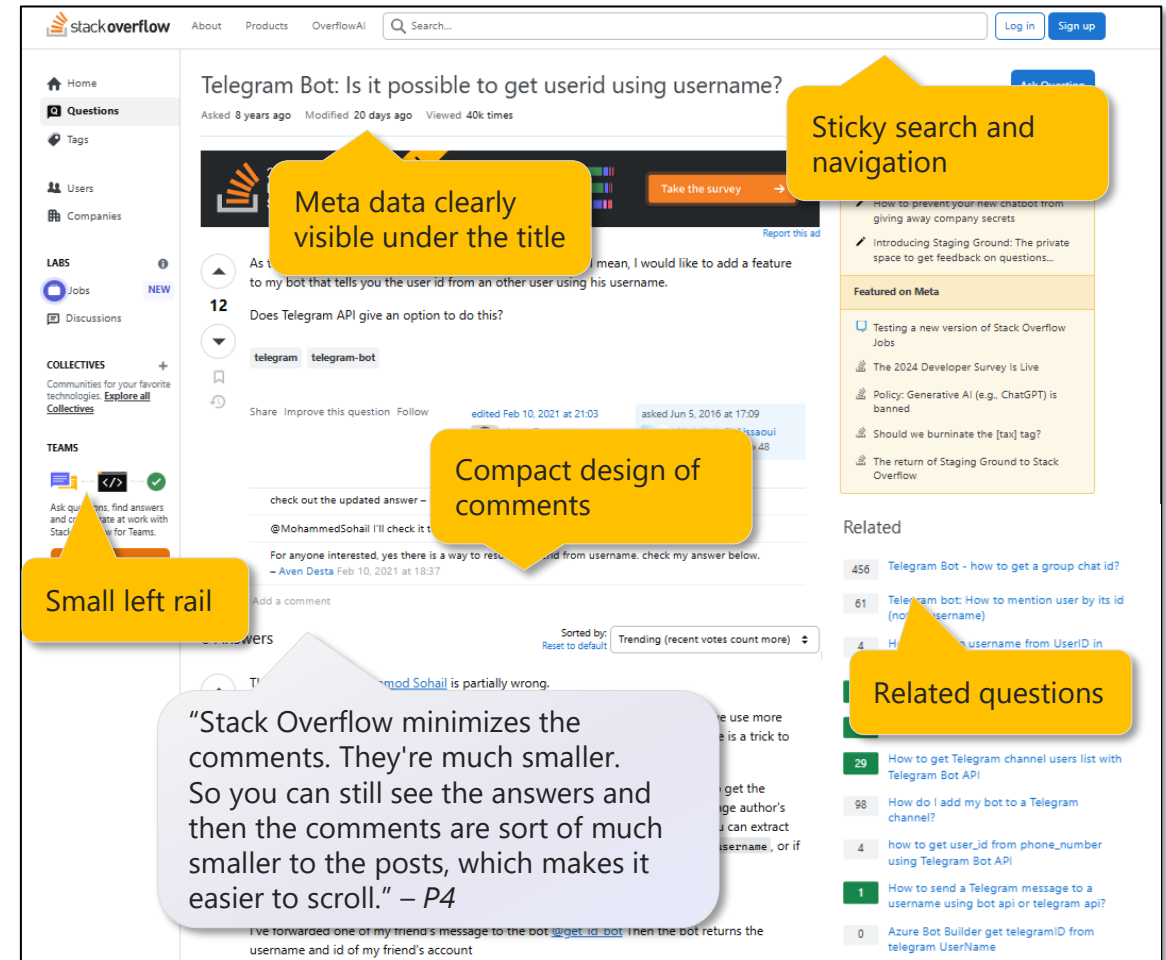
Some of the elements users preferred on Stack Overflow were also noted in previous Unified research

- Users who rated Stack Overflow higher than Q&A emphasized that their preference was influenced by the more compact design of the comments.
- Users mentioned their preference for having similar or related questions available on a Q&A thread. This finding surfaced in previous work.
- Users appreciated the top navigation remaining sticky as you scroll on the page and the meta data under the title.
- Although users feel Stack Overflow is more cluttered than Q&A, users felt they utilize the real estate (left rail) more effectively. This finding surfaced in previous work.

Recommendations

- Consider design solutions which would condense or nest the comment structure.
- Consider substituting 'Additional resources' with questions relevant to the original question.
- Explore design solutions to make better use of the available white space.

Stack Overflow



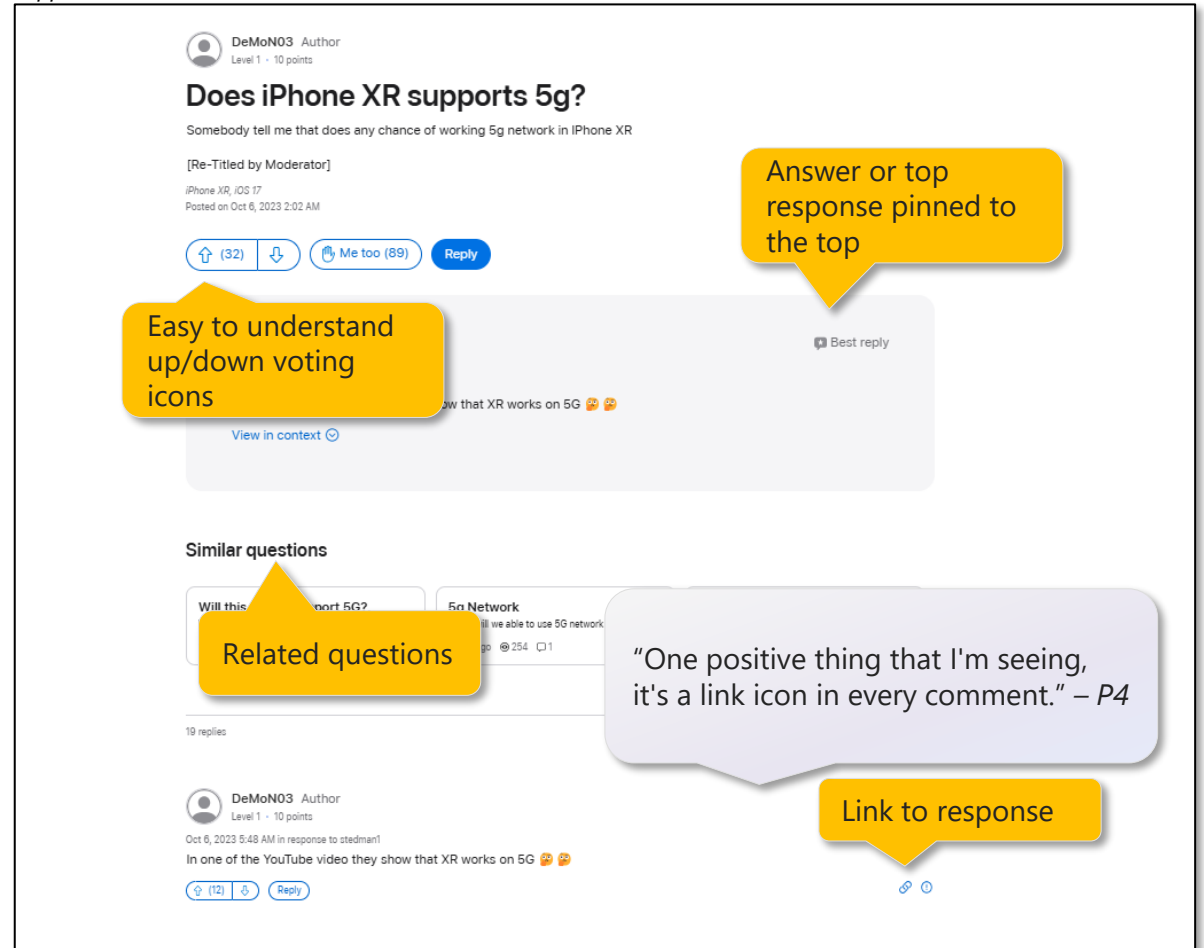
Although ranked fourth overall, users liked that the best or accepted answer was visually distinct from other comments and prominently pinned to the top

- A few users mentioned the usefulness of being able to link to a specific comment and thought Q&A should offer a similar functionality.
- REPEAT: Users mentioned their preference for having similar or related questions available on a Q&A thread. This finding surfaced in previous work.
- A couple of users specifically called out liking the design of the up/down voting button.

Recommendations

- Explore design and engineering solutions to link to a specific comment and/or answer within a thread.
- REPEAT: Consider substituting 'Additional resources' with questions relevant to the original question.
- REPEAT: Explore thread designs which surface or pin the accepted answer to the top of the thread.

Apple



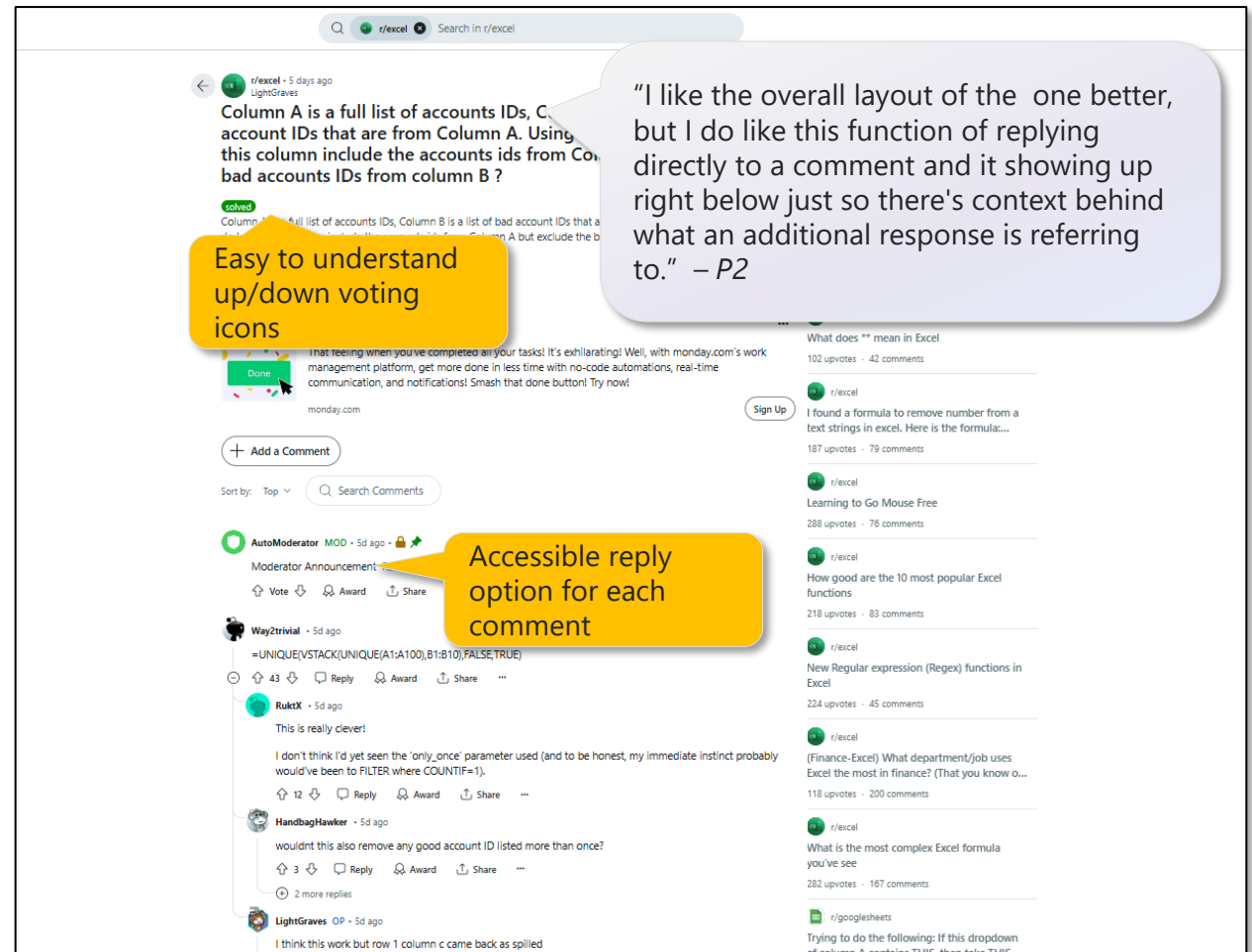
The ability to reply directly to comments was seen as a crucial feature that Reddit possesses but Q&A lacks

- Users tend to use Reddit for engaging in discussions about topics rather than seeking solutions for technical issues.
- The up and down voting feature on Reddit was considered beneficial as it indicates the relevance of posts based on the number of votes they receive.

Recommendations

- Explore design solutions that would streamline the replying process on Q&A and provide an intuitive way to engage with thread content.

Reddit thread





Key Recommendations & Next Steps

Key Recommendations

Near Term

1. **Ensure users can organize content in a way that is helpful and relevant** to them by providing them ways to sort content more easily.
2. **Simplify comment structure** to enable users to quickly scan relevant content and reduce cognitive load.
3. **Explore design and engineering solutions to allow users to reply directly** and tag relevant contributors in a thread.
4. **Ensure users can access 'search' and 'Ask a question'** without scrolling back to the top of the thread.
5. **Explore design solutions that facilitate easy identification of moderators and original posters** to help reduce cognitive load when reviewing a thread.

Long Term

1. **Focus on building a thread experience that is simple and reduces scrolling and cognitive load.** Q&A should provide a consistent user experience that aligns with users' mental models, whether threads are content-heavy or light, ensuring a seamless experience for all users regardless of their technical proficiency.

Next Steps

1. **Continue exploring and refining design concepts to enhance a seamless thread experience**, regardless of the thread content density. Potential research roadmap:
 - a) **Perform A/B tests between different proposed design concepts** to uncover user sentiment, readability, and pain points.
 - b) **Perform an A/B test focusing on user feedback prompts**, such as changing 'Was this helpful?' to 'This worked for me' and comparing user engagement with 'Comments' versus 'Reply'.
 - c) **Conduct quantitative research using data to analyze** the average frequency of users posting comments as answers, the typical number of comments and answers per thread, and the average length of answers.