Learning and Programming Challenges of Rust: A Mixed-Methods Study*

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ABSTRACT

Rust is a young systems programming language designed to provide both the safety guarantees of high-level languages and the execution performance of low-level languages. To achieve this design goal, Rust provides a suite of safety rules and checks against those rules at the compile time to eliminate many memory-safety and thread-safety issues. Due to its safety and performance, Rust's popularity has increased significantly in recent years, and it has already been adopted to build many safety-critical software systems.

It is critical to understand the learning and programming challenges imposed by Rust's safety rules. For this purpose, we first conducted an empirical study through close, manual inspection of 100 Rust-related Stack Overflow questions. We sought to understand (1) what safety rules are challenging to learn and program with, (2) under which contexts a safety rule becomes more difficult to apply, and (3) whether the Rust compiler is sufficiently helpful in debugging safety-rule violations. We then performed an online survey with 101 Rust programmers to validate the findings of the empirical study. We invited participants to evaluate program variants that differ from each other, either in terms of violated safety rules or the code constructs involved in the violation, and compared the participants' performance on the variants. Our mixed-methods investigation revealed a range of consistent findings that can benefit Rust learners, practitioners, and language designers.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Software and its engineering → General programming languages**; **Development frameworks and environments**.

KEYWORDS

Rust; Programming Challenges; Empirical Study; Online Survey

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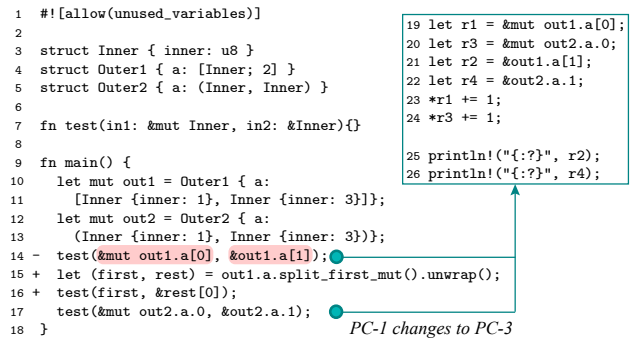
1 INTRODUCTION

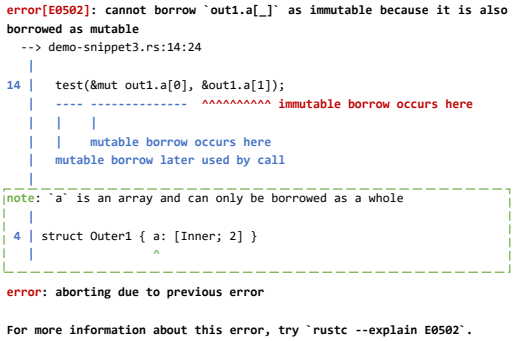
Rust is a new programming language designed to build safe and efficient systems software [31, 36]. The key innovation of Rust is its suite of safety rules that are checked against during compilation to catch memory-safety and thread-safety issues. Alongside the language's safety mechanism, Rust maintains its compiled executable programs to be as efficient as C programs. Due to its safety and efficiency, Rust has become increasingly popular; it has been rated the most beloved programming language every year since 2016 [55–59, 61] and was the fifth fastest growing language on GitHub in 2018 [37]. Rust has already been adopted by many open-source programmers and big tech companies to build safety-critical software [28, 34, 41, 42, 45, 54].

Rust's safety mechanism centers around two important concepts: *ownership* and *lifetime*. The basic safety rule requires each value to have exactly one owner variable, and the value is freed when its owner variable ends its lifetime. To improve programming flexibility, Rust extends this basic rule to a suite of extended rules, such as allowing ownership to be moved to another owner or to be borrowed using a reference, and still guarantees memory safety and thread safety. Rust's safety mechanism is elegant and effective. It essentially prohibits programs from having mutability and aliasing at the same time, and inherently avoids many severe memory bugs (*e.g.*, use after free) and concurrency bugs (*e.g.*, data race). A recent empirical study reports that if a program is written solely in safe Rust code, then it will have no memory bugs, confirming the effectiveness of Rust's safety mechanism in practice [43].

Unfortunately, Rust is known to have a steep learning curve and is difficult to program in practice [1, 73]. The ease with which programmers can write code that violates Rust's safety rules and is rejected by the Rust compiler comes down to two reasons. First, Rust's safety mechanism is unique, and the related grammar and semantics are very different from traditional systems programming languages (*e.g.*, C/C++) [30]. Thus, it is difficult for programmers to migrate the programming experience they have gained from other languages to coding in Rust [51]. Second, the design philosophy of Rust is to reject all suspicious code and force programmers to



(a) Rust program



(b) Compiler error messages

Figure 1: A Rust program and its compile error. ***In Figure 1a, the program is PC-1 in the survey; the red-colored tokens violate a safety rule; and "+" and "-" denote code added and deleted to fix the violation. We replaced lines 14 and 17 with the code in the cyan-colored rectangle to create PC-3 in the survey. In Figure 1b, the part in the green-colored rectangle does not belong to the original error messages, and we added it in the survey.***

prove their code follows all safety rules. Rust's safety checks are strict, sometimes overly so, making Rust code hard to be compiled.

A piece of Rust code is shown in Figure 1a. Structs `Outer1` and `Outer2` are declared at lines 4 and 5, respectively. The two structs are similar to each other in the sense that both of them only contain one field with the same name and the same contents (two `Inner` objects). However, the field of `Outer1` is an array, while the field of `Outer2` is a tuple. Function `test()` takes two `Inner` objects as inputs. It uses a mutable reference to borrow the first `Inner` object and an immutable reference to borrow the second one. Function `test()` is called at line 14 using the two `Inner` objects in an `Outer1` object as inputs. However, the Rust compiler reports an error on this line (Figure 1b). The reason for the error is that the elements of an array must be borrowed altogether in Rust (or after an element is borrowed, all other elements in the same array are also considered as being borrowed), since the Rust compiler conservatively assumes an index can access any element in an array. Rust does not allow a mutable reference to coexist with other references to the same object to prevent simultaneous mutability and aliasing. Array `out1.a` has already been mutably borrowed as the first parameter. Thus, it cannot be borrowed again as the second parameter. Counterintuitively, line 17 is allowed by the compiler because different tuple fields can be borrowed separately.

Figure 1b shows the error messages reported by the Rust compiler. The compiler points out which ownership rule is violated, where it is violated, and how it is violated, but it fails to provide the most important information for the programmer that array elements are borrowed together in Rust, causing the programmer to go to Stack Overflow to ask for more explanations about the code and the error messages [62].

The above case demonstrates the complexity of applying Rust's safety mechanism under concrete coding scenarios and the difficulty in writing programs accepted by the Rust compiler. Besides the safety rule that a mutable reference cannot coexist with another reference to the same object, programmers must also know how array (and tuple) elements are borrowed to avoid similar mistakes. Moreover, the compiler may not always provide all necessary information for programmers to understand and fix the errors.

Our ultimate goal is to facilitate the learning and programming of Rust. We take the identification of the challenges imposed by Rust's safety rules as the first step. Those rules are unique and complex. As shown by the empirical study in Section 3, they indeed cause challenges to Rust programmers in the real world. Rust is still evolving [10, 67]. Learning Rust is a continuous process, and programming Rust in practice often involves studying how to apply a safety rule under a particular coding context. Thus, we do not differentiate learning from programming in this paper. Overall, we aim to answer the following research questions (RQs):

- **RQ-1:** Which Rust safety rules are difficult to understand?
- **RQ-2:** Under which programming contexts is a safety rule more challenging to apply?
- **RQ-3:** How helpful is the Rust compiler in resolving programming errors due to safety-rule violations?

We adopted two approaches to answer these questions. We first conducted an empirical study on Rust-related Stack Overflow questions, since programmers usually seek technical advice on Stack Overflow for issues they cannot resolve on their own [2, 14, 69, 74]. We then performed an online survey to validate the findings of the empirical study by closely examining how Rust programmers answer carefully designed survey questions.

We built two datasets for the empirical study. The larger one contains 15,509 Rust-related Stack Overflow questions, and the smaller one contains 100 questions caused by violations of Rust's safety rules. To answer **RQ-1**, we built a taxonomy for safety-rule violations in the small dataset. The taxonomy contains two major categories: *complex lifetime computation* and *violating ownership rules*. Each of these contains several sub-categories. To answer **RQ-2**, we applied the LDA model [9] to the large dataset, and computed the correlation between violated safety rules and involved code constructs for the small dataset. We manually interpreted the results to identify scenarios where a safety rule is more challenging to apply. To answer **RQ-3**, we examined whether the Rust compiler provides all necessary information for debugging safety-rule violations in the small dataset.

The empirical study yielded several important findings. First, Rust's safety rules are difficult for programmers to apply in practice, and computing a lifetime is more challenging than applying an ownership rule. Moreover, some safety-rule violations are highly correlated with particular code constructs, indicating the corresponding rules are more challenging to apply to those code constructs. In

Table 1: Our findings in the empirical study and how the findings are validated in the online survey.

Findings in Empirical Study (Section 3)	**Validation in Online Survey** (Section 4)
(1) Rust's complex safety rules indeed bring unique challenges to its programmers.	(1) A large portion of participants at least "sometimes" felt confused about Rust's lifetime (or ownership) rules.
RQ-1: Which Rust safety rules are difficult to understand?	
(2) A Rust safety rule may be difficult to apply in concrete scenarios.	(2) The average scores in marking program tokens that violated Rust's safety rules ranged from 0.39 to 0.75.
(3) Programmers ask more lifetime-related questions on Stack Overflow than ownership-related questions, suggesting that lifetime computation is more difficult than applying ownership rules.	(3) Participants who "always" understood compiler errors for lifetime-rule violations (10.0%) were significantly fewer than those who "always" understood compiler errors for ownership-rule violations (39.6%). (4) Programs PD-1 and PD-2 shared the same code constructs, but PD-1 due to errors in lifetime computation was reported with a significantly higher difficulty level than PD-2 caused by violating an ownership rule.
(4) The majority (91.8%) of safety-rule violations can be fixed using safe code or well-encapsulated interior unsafe libraries.	N.A.
RQ-2: Under which programming contexts is a safety rule more challenging to apply?	
(5) The same Rust safety rule has different difficulty levels when applied to different code constructs, and different safety rules have different difficulty levels when applied to the same code construct.	(5) Participants performed significantly better in labeling error tokens for program PC-1 than for program PC-2, where PC-1 and PC-2 shared the same code constructs but violated different safety rules. (6) A non-negligible portion of participants were confused by how to apply the same rule to two different code constructs (array and tuple).
RQ-3: How helpful is the Rust compiler in resolving safety-rule violations?	
(6) The Rust compiler may not provide all information necessary to understand and fix violations of Rust's safety rules.	(7) Participants shown with enhanced compiler error messages performed significantly better than those with the original messages in explaining how safety rules are violated for program PC-1.

addition, the Rust compiler may not provide all the necessary information for comprehending safety-rule violations. We summarize our findings in Table 1.

In the online survey, we first asked for participants' demographic information, technical background, and previous experience in interacting with Rust's safety mechanism and the Rust compiler. We then showed them four small Rust programs, named PA, PB, PC, and PD. We only asked participants whether PA and PB could be compiled to test their Rust knowledge. We sampled PC and PD from two sets of similar program variants. All variants contained a safety-rule violation; however, they were different from each other either in the safety rules they violated or in the code constructs those violations involved. For both PC and PD, we asked participants to (1) pinpoint error root causes by highlighting program tokens, (2) evaluate how difficult it was to comprehend the errors before and after seeing the error messages, (3) select the violated rules, (4) rate the helpfulness of the Rust compiler, and (5) describe the error root causes in their own words. We received 101 valid responses and conducted extensive data analysis on the responses. As shown in Table 1, we confirmed many findings of the empirical study with significant confidence.

Overall, our mixed-methods investigation reveals what to learn about Rust, how to learn it, and how to interpret compiler error messages, all of which can benefit Rust learners and programmers. Moreover, our investigation pinpoints information missed by the Rust compiler when reporting safety-rule violations and thus provides valuable guidance for the evolution of the Rust compiler.

In sum, this paper makes the following key contributions.

- We performed the first empirical study on Stack Overflow questions related to violations of Rust's safety mechanism.
- We gained six findings regarding the programming challenges caused by Rust's safety rules and the helpfulness of the Rust compiler in debugging safety-rule violations. Those findings can be useful references for Rust learners and programmers.
- We conducted an online survey and confirmed our findings with statistical significance.

All our study and survey results can be found at bit.ly/3uNAe88.

2 BACKGROUND

This section gives some background for this project, including Rust's safety mechanism and the information provided by the Rust compiler for safety-rule violations.

2.1 Rust's Safety Mechanism

Rust's safety mechanism centers around two critical concepts, *ownership* and *lifetime*. The basic rule requires that a value is associated with *one and only one* owner variable, and that the value is dropped (freed) when its owner variable's lifetime ends. Sometimes, the place where a variable's lifetime ends is easy to determine, such as at the end of a function or at a matched curly bracket. However, there are cases where lifetime computation is much more complex than inspecting a variable's lexical scope. To improve its programming flexibility, Rust extends its basic safety rule into a suite of rules, while still guaranteeing memory safety and thread safety.

Ownership Move. Rust allows a value's ownership to be moved to a different owner variable or to a different scope (*e.g.*, a function, a closure), but it prohibits any access to the previous owner variable after the move. For example, array `foo` is moved to function `max()` at line 6 in Figure 2, since the parameter type of function `max()` is "`Vec<i8>`", not "`& Vec<i8>`" like the function at line 2. Thus, the Rust compiler reports an error at line 7, since `foo` has already been moved and it cannot be accessed anymore.

Ownership Borrow. Rust allows to temporarily borrow a variable's ownership using a reference, which can be immutable for read-only

```
1 fn max(array: Vec<i8>) -> i8 { 71 }
2 // fn max(array: &Vec<i8>) -> i8 { 71 }
3 fn min(array: Vec<i8>) -> i8 { 8 }
4 fn main() {
5   let foo = vec![71, 23, 8];
6   let max_val = max(foo);
7   let min_val = min(foo);
8   println!("{} {}", max_val, min_val);
9 }
```

Figure 2: An example of ownership move. ***The program cannot be compiled, since*** `foo` ***is moved at line 6 and it cannot be used at line 7.***

```
1 fn bar(x: &mut i32) {
2   println!("{}", x);
3 }
4 fn main() {
5   let mut a = 100;
6   let y = &a;
7   println!("{}", y);
8   bar(&mut a);
9 }
```

Figure 3: An example of ownership borrowing. ***The program can be compiled.***

accesses or mutable for read-write accesses. A borrow ends at the last usage site of the reference. Rust requires that a reference can only be used within its borrowed variable's lifetime. Rust permits multiple immutable references to a variable to exist at the same time, but it only allows at most one mutable reference to a variable at any time. These rules essentially guarantee all accesses to a variable are within its lifetime and forbid simultaneous mutability and aliasing, avoiding many severe memory and concurrency bugs. For example, in Figure 3, variable `a` is immutably borrowed by `y` at line 6 and mutably borrowed when calling `bar()` at line 8. Although the lexical scope of `y` does not end until the end of function `main()` at line 9, because `y` is not used after line 7, the Rust compiler decides that the borrow ends at line 7 and that it does not overlap with the mutable borrow at line 8. Thus, the compiler compiles the program.

Lifetime Annotation. Rust allows programmers to explicitly annotate a variable's lifetime with an apostrophe followed by an annotation name. Lifetime annotations can be used at function declaration sites to specify the lifetime relationship among parameters and the return value, and at struct declaration sites to describe the lifetime requirement between a struct object and its reference fields. When checking a function or a struct, the compiler reports errors when safety-rule violations are inferred based on the lifetime annotations of the function or the struct. When calling a function, the compiler inspects whether the real parameters satisfy the corresponding annotations. Rust allows lifetime elision to reduce the annotation burden, and the compiler automatically infers elided annotations during safety checks.

Safe vs. Unsafe. All code discussed so far has been safe Rust code. Rust permits programmers to use the "`unsafe`" keyword to bypass some safety checks and conduct unsafe operations (*e.g.*, pointer operations, calling an unsafe function). Unsafe code is similar to the traditional C programming language. A piece of code or a function can be unsafe. A function can also be interior unsafe by containing unsafe code internally but exposing a safe API externally, and it can be used as a safe function. In this paper, we focus on understanding programming challenges when coding safe code, since safe code must strictly follow Rust's safety mechanism, and it is used much more often than unsafe code in Rust programs [43].

2.2 Rust's Compiler Error Messages

The Rust compiler serves as the primary communication channel between programmers and Rust's safety mechanism. It checks against the aforementioned safety rules and reports an error when detecting a rule violation. Typically, a piece of error messages contains three components: (1) the violated safety rule and its corresponding error code, (2) the lines of code or program tokens that violate the rule, and (3) some explanations about the violation. For example, Figure 1b shows the error messages for the program in Figure 1a, which present the error code ("E0502") and the violated rule ("cannot borrow ... as mutable") at the beginning, underline program tokens violating the rule in red, and underline several other tokens in blue to provide more information. Sometimes error messages contain suggestions about how to fix an error or even directly give a concrete patch. Moreover, the Rust compiler provides a generic explanation for each error code, which can be obtained by executing rustc (*e.g.*, "`rustc --explain E0502`" in Figure 1b).

Unfortunately, Rust's safety rules are complex [13, 52] and some are counterintuitive [43]. Moreover, compiler error messages may be imprecise [21] or even contain misleading information [19, 20]. Thus, compiler error messages may not be good enough for Rust programmers to debug and fix safety-rule violations. In Section 3.4, we combine cognitive task analysis [32] and manual inspection of safety-rule violations in real Rust programs to systematically evaluate error messages reported by the Rust compiler.

3 STUDYING STACK OVERFLOW QUESTIONS

This section presents our empirical study on Stack Overflow questions. Our study aims to answer the research questions previously presented. Its results can guide the learning process of Rust and improve the interaction between programmers and the Rust compiler.

3.1 Methodology

We construct a large dataset and a small dataset for statistical analysis and manual inspection, respectively.

3.1.1 Large Dataset. The large dataset contains all Stack Overflow questions that are labeled with tag "Rust", have a score greater than or equal to zero, and have at least one answer as of February 17, 2021. In total, there are 15,509 questions in the large dataset.

We randomly sampled 100 questions from the large dataset and manually inspected why programmers asked them on Stack Overflow. Common reasons include not knowing how to use a library function (26%), being unable to understand Rust's safety rules (23%), being confused by type conversions and type checks in Rust (14%), not knowing how to implement or use a trait (similar to an interface in Java) (9%), and failing to use FFI properly (7%).

Finding 1: *Rust shares many programming challenges with traditional programming languages, but its complex safety rules pose unique difficulties.*

3.1.2 Small Dataset. We randomly sampled 100 questions related to Rust's safety mechanism from the large dataset to build the small dataset. We studied these questions by reading their question texts, answers, and discussions. Moreover, each sampled question

Table 2: Root causes and fixes of violations in the small dataset. ***Safe/Unsafe: directly writing safe/unsafe code; SL: safe libraries; IUL: interior unsafe libraries; UL: unsafe libraries; and No: eight violations do not have fixes.***

Root Causes	Safe	Unsafe	SL	IUL	UL	No	Total
Complex Lifetime Computation							
Intra-procedural	31	0	1	10	0	2	44
Inter-procedural	19	2	1	4	0	4	30
Simple Syntax Error	3	0	0	0	0	0	3
Violating Ownership Rules							
Move Rule	12	0	1	5	0	0	18
Borrowing Rule	9	1	3	8	0	2	23
Total	74	3	6	27	0	8	118

contains a code snippet for describing the problem. Based on the snippets, we successfully implemented standalone programs and reproduced all problems offline. For eight questions, the programs can be compiled, but the compilation contradicts the questioners' understanding. We consider each of these questions to be a case where the programmer's understanding violates a safety rule. For all other questions, the programs cannot be compiled. Among these, 76 programs contain one violation of a safety rule, 14 programs contain two violations, and the remaining two contain three violations. In total, there are 118 safety-rule violations in the small dataset.

3.2 Which Safety Rules Are Difficult?

To determine which safety rules are difficult and are more likely to cause usage violations, we build a taxonomy for the root causes of the violations in the small dataset. As shown in Table 2, we first divide the root causes into complex lifetime computation and violating ownership rules, as they are the two core concepts of Rust's safety mechanism. We then separate each of these categories into several sub-categories.

3.2.1 Complex Lifetime Computation. Lifetime computation may be much more complicated than referring to a variable's lexical scope. Seventy-seven violations are due to complex lifetime computation. For most of them, programmers estimate a variable's lifetime to be longer or shorter than it actually is, thus violating a safety rule. We further divide these violations into those due to intra-procedural lifetime computation, those due to inter-procedural lifetime computation, and those caused by syntax errors when declaring a struct. These sub-categories do not overlap with each other and cover all cases of lifetime computation.

Intra-procedural Lifetime Computation. Lifetime computation may be difficult even for cases within a single function. Forty-four violations are in this category, 32 of which are cases where programmers miscompute variable lifetimes when using particular code constructs, including control flow constructs (*e.g.*, if, loop), data structures (*e.g.*, hashmap, vector), temporary variables, and program constants. For example, SO#65682678 (Stack Overflow question 65682678 [63]) is caused by miscomputing the lifetime of a reference held by a closure, while both SO#63428868 and SO#51044568 are caused by errors when computing a lifetime inside a `match` block. Eleven out of the 44 violations are due to unsatisfied lifetime requirements at a function declaration or a struct declaration. For example, when declaring an `async` function, Rust requires an explicit lifetime annotation for each input object. Violating this

```
1  struct Foo {}
2  struct Bar2<'b> { x: &'b Foo,}
3
4  impl<'b> Bar2<'b> {
5  -  fn f(&'b mut self)-> &'b Foo {
6  +  fn f(&mut self)-> &'b Foo {
7       self.x
8     }
9  }
10 fn f4() {
11   let foo = Foo {};
12   let mut bar2 = Bar2 {
13     x: &foo };
14   bar2.f();
15   let z = bar2.f();
16 }
```

Figure 4: An example of complex inter-procedural lifetime computation. ***The red-colored tokens are the root-cause tokens. "+" and "-" denote code added and deleted to fix the violation.***

requirement is the root cause of SO#62440972. The remaining violation is due to a lack of basic understanding of Rust.

Inter-procedural Lifetime Computation. Thirty violations are due to lifetime computation across function boundaries. Among them, 22 are cases where a real parameter does not satisfy the lifetime requirement of its corresponding formal parameter. The remaining eight are caused by unexpected lifetime extensions through a function call. Figure 4 shows one such example from SO#39827244. Function `f()` is implemented for struct `Bar2` at line 5. It borrows a `Bar2` object and returns its field `x`. Lifetime annotation `'b` is specified for both input reference `self` and the return value, so that the questioner thought the borrowing of a `Bar2` object ended when the corresponding return terminated its lifetime. The questioner also believed that since the return value at line 14 is not saved to any variable, both the lifetime of the return and the borrow of `bar2` ended at line 14. He was confused about how the function still borrowed `bar2` after line 14 and why the compiler complained that two mutable references to `bar2` exist at line 15. The reason is that lifetime annotation `'b` is also applied to struct `Bar2` at line 4, so that the borrow conducted by function `f()` does not stop until the borrowed object ends its lifetime. Thus, the borrow of `bar2` at line 14 ends at line 16, which is out of the questioner's expectation.

When declaring a function or a variable, programmers may explicitly specify all lifetime annotations or choose to elide some annotations. Among the 30 violations in this category, 16 only involve explicit lifetime annotations (*e.g.*, Figure 4), and the lifetime miscomputation or mismatch happens at an elided annotation for the remaining 14 cases (*e.g.*, SO#40053550).

Simple Syntax Errors. Three violations are caused by the misuse of lifetime annotations when declaring or implementing a struct. For example, the questioner of SO#62422857 only used an apostrophe to annotate a struct field without providing an annotation name.

3.2.2 Violating Ownership Rules. Ownership rules can be divided into move rules and borrowing rules [50]. Among the 41 ownership-rule violations in the small dataset, 18 of them violate a move rule, and the remaining 23 do not comply with a borrowing rule.

Move Rule Violations. A variable cannot be accessed after it is moved. Non-compliance with this requirement causes 18 violations. Of these, 16 violations involve (complex) program constructs. For example, SO#65873356 is caused by accessing an object that has already been moved to a called function. As another example, when an object is moved to a closure, it may be unclear to programmers whether the move happens at the closure's creation site or at the location where the closure is firstly used, which is the root cause of SO#62125100. The remaining two cases are very simple, and

we speculate the questioners asked the corresponding questions because they did not know the move rule.

Borrowing Rule Violations. Misuse of references leads to 23 violations. Two of them are due to mistakenly borrowing a collection of objects altogether, instead of a single element (*e.g.*, Figure 1a). Another two are cases where programmers intended to copy an object using a reference but mistakenly copied the reference itself. Moreover, 11 cases are due to using a reference to move an object, which is not allowed in Rust. For example, "`a = *x`" moves the object referenced by `x` if the object does not implement the `Copy` trait, which confused the questioner of SO#35649968. In addition, mutability mismatches (*e.g.*, changing a variable using an immutable reference) cause two violations. Rust prohibits a closure from returning a mutable reference since it leads two mutable references existing simultaneously (one is returned and the other is held by the closure). Not complying with this rule causes three violations. The remaining three are due to not knowing how to use the reference counted library (`Rc`) or library APIs that take a reference as input.

Finding 2: *Rust's safety mechanism may be difficult to apply in concrete usage scenarios.*

Finding 3: *More lifetime-related questions are asked on Stack Overflow than ownership-related questions, indicating lifetime computation is more challenging in Rust programming.*

3.2.3 How Violations Are Fixed? We examine whether unsafe code is used in the violation patches to understand whether programmers can achieve the desired functionalities while complying with all safety rules. Since eight violations are cases where programmers' understanding (not implementation) conflicts with the safety rules and therefore have no fix, we focus on the remaining 110 cases.

As shown in Table 2, only three violations are fixed by writing unsafe code directly (column "Unsafe"). For example, the questioner of SO#64274964 wants to use two editor objects to modify the same image at the same time. Since the two editors change two different parts of the image, there is no bug logically. However, the Rust compiler does not allow the two editors to have two mutable references to the image at the same time. The patch uses pointers in unsafe code to have two writers for the same image simultaneously.

Another 27 violations are patched with interior unsafe library functions (column "IUL" in Table 2). Although the interfaces of those functions are safe and programmers can use them as safe functions, they actually contain unsafe code internally. For example, SO#57766918 is patched by calling interior unsafe function `into_iter()` [48].

All other violations are fixed by writing safe code directly or using safe library functions (columns "Safe" and "SL" in Table 2). For example, SO#39827244 in Figure 4 is fixed by removing the lifetime annotation of `self` to break the lifetime binding between the borrow conducted by function `f()` and the borrowed `Bar2` object, and SO#62491845 in Figure 1a is fixed by calling safe standard library function `split_first_mut()` [49], which returns the first element of the input array. These patches only involve safe code.

Finding 4: *The majority of safety-rule violations are fixed with safe code, and a small portion of violations are patched using well-encapsulated interior unsafe libraries. Programmers usually do not have to write unsafe code by themselves to fix safety-rule violations.*

3.3 When Is a Safety Rule More Confusing?

To detect when a safety rule is more difficult, we first apply the LDA model [9] to the large dataset. We then follow existing empirical studies on software artifacts [26, 29, 68] and compute a statistical metric *lift* to measure the correlation between root-cause categories and involved code constructs for the small dataset.

3.3.1 LDA Model. The LDA model can pinpoint the hidden topics of analyzed documents, and the hidden topics of Rust-related Stack Overflow questions describe when programmers feel Rust is more challenging. We take two steps to apply LDA. We first identify questions related to safety rules. We then run LDA on the questions and manually interpret the identified topics.

We use Stack Overflow tags to identify questions related to safety rules. Following the taxonomy in Section 3.2, we divide safety rules into three groups: lifetime-related rules, move rules, and borrowing rules. We find 790, 28, and 848 questions respectively for these rule groups in the large dataset.

For each group of rules, we use the Gensim package [46] to run bigram LDA on all its identified questions. We remove Rust code in those questions and consider only question titles, descriptions, and answers in the analysis. We preprocess the texts using NLTK [7] to lemmatize words and to remove stop words and punctuations. We try each of the numbers from 5 to 30 as the topic number to configure the model. We manually inspect the results for the topic number with coherence value [33] closest to zero, since a coherence value closer to zero represents a better clustering result. The topic numbers with the best coherence value for lifetime, borrowing, and move are 5, 5, and 9, respectively.

After reading the top words and representative questions reported by LDA, we identify several challenging scenarios for each group of rules. For example, 204 questions contain the topic of how to use lifetime annotations in a trait, 32 questions contain the topic of how to borrow an element from a container, and three questions are about moving an object in a `match` block. Rust programmers can refer to our identified topics to enhance their understanding of Rust's safety rules.

3.3.2 Lift Correlation. We use the lift metric to measure the correlation between the root-cause categories in Section 3.2 and code constructs. The lift of category A and code construct B is computed as $lift(AB) = \frac{P(AB)}{P(A)P(B)}$, where $P(AB)$ represents the probability of a violation that is due to A and also involves B, $P(A)$ means the probability of a violation caused by A, and $P(B)$ denotes the probability of a violation involving B. If $lift(AB)$ equals 1, A is independent of B. If $lift(AB)$ is larger than 1, A and B are positively correlated, indicating when A is applied to B, it is more likely to cause problems and it is more challenging. The larger the lift value is, the more positively A and B are correlated. If $lift(AB)$ is smaller than 1, A and B are negatively correlated.

Among all code constructs with at least ten violations, root cause "inter-procedural lifetime computation" is most correlated with the `'static` code construct. The lift value is 2.36. Self-defined annotations and generics are ranked as the second and the third most correlated code constructs with "inter-procedural lifetime computation." Their lift values are 2.32 and 2.14, respectively. "Intra-procedural lifetime computation" is most correlated with standard

library `Box`, function declarations, and `return` statements, with lift values 2.19, 1.89, and 1.87, respectively. The top three code constructs correlated with "move rule violations" are loops (1.96), vectors (1.38), and function calls (1.19). The largest three lift values for "borrowing rule violations" are 1.57 for hashmaps, 1.35 for iterators, and 1.31 for closure declarations.

Many of those widely used code constructs have different lift values with different root-cause categories. For example, function declarations are positively correlated with "intra-procedural lifetime computation", but they are negatively correlated with the other three categories. As another example, generics are positively correlated with "inter-procedural lifetime computation"; however, they are roughly independent of "borrowing rule violations."

Finding 5: *The same rule has different difficulty levels when applied to different code constructs, and different rules have different difficulty levels when applied to the same code construct.*

3.4 Evaluating Compiler Error Messages

As we discussed earlier, 110 rule violations in the small dataset can trigger compiler errors[1]. The Rust compiler associates 20 different error codes to 103 of the 110 violations. Error code "E0382" (*i.e.*, accessing a variable after it is moved) appears most frequently at 19 times. The compiler does not provide an error code for the remaining seven violations, which are caused by four different uncommon problems.

We leverage the 110 violations to evaluate whether the compiler provides all necessary information for programmers to comprehend safety-rule violations. This evaluation comes in two steps. We first conduct cognitive task analysis [15] to identify the steps taken by Rust experts to comprehend error messages. We then follow those steps to analyze whether the information required at each step is provided in the error messages for each violation.

Cognitive Task Analysis (CTA). A CTA typically interviews three to five experts for a subject [11]. Our CTA aims to identify *how* experts comprehend Rust's compiler error messages, rather than to sample their opinions on particular compiler errors. Thus, we chose three paper authors as the CTA participants and another author as the CTA analyst. All the CTA participants have at least one year's experience in programming Rust and use Rust on a weekly basis.

Our CTA contains a think-aloud observation and a semi-structured interview [12]. In the think-aloud observation, participants were asked about their general impression of Rust's compiler errors and their steps to understand compiler error messages. The analyst recorded each participant's think-aloud and analyzed the recording to identify key steps in comprehending error messages. In the semi-structured interview, the analyst asked participants questions about the key steps for the purpose of validation. The three participants are interviewed separately to avoid premature consensus.

Both the think-aloud observation and the semi-structured interview were audio-recorded and automatically transcribed. Each participant was required to inspect another participant's response. The analyst combined all responses into a description of the procedures, decisions/actions, concepts, and conditions/situations used by experts to comprehend Rust's compiler error messages.

[1]The compiler version we evaluate is 1.50.0, which was released in February 2021.

We further invited three *external* experts to evaluate the description. We recruited the experts using the snowball method [22]. Specifically, we asked our friends to help find academic researchers who had published papers on Rust recently, and our friends in turn asked their friends for help. All external experts have at least two years' Rust experience and use Rust on a daily basis. We believe they have sufficient expertise to validate the description of the error comprehension steps. The initial average proportion of agreement was 0.7, a satisfactory agreement level [27], indicating our method is *sufficient* to capture how programmers comprehend Rust's compiler errors. We updated a few description components based on the external experts' comments. In the end, the description was agreed upon by both internal and external experts.

Studying Violations. We then follow the description to examine whether error messages contain all the needed information for comprehending each violation. For 59 out of the 110 violations, their error messages contain all necessary information. Programmers can use the highlighted code and the compiler's explanations to determine why the Rust compiler rejects the code. Error messages miss some important information for the remaining 51 violations; these fall into three categories.

First, for nine violations, the Rust compiler fails to explain how a safety rule works on a particular code construct. For example, the error messages in Figure 1b do not mention that elements of an array cannot be borrowed individually in Rust.

Second, for 32 violations, the compiler fails to explain the key steps in computing a lifetime or a borrowing relationship. For example, the error messages associated with SO#39827244 in Figure 4 do not explain why the borrow of `bar2` at line 14 does not end until the borrowed object terminates its lifetime at line 16.

Third, in the remaining ten cases, the compiler fails to explain the relationship between two lifetime annotations, making it difficult to understand the annotation mismatch in the error messages. For example, SO#53835730 is due to using two references with different lifetimes to call a function that requires two inputs to have the same lifetime. The compiler simply complains that the second reference does not live as long as the elided lifetime annotation of the first reference. However, it does not explain that the first reference is the input of the caller function and has a lifetime longer than the caller. In contrast, the second reference is a reference to a local variable and has a lifetime shorter than the caller.

Finding 6: *The Rust compiler may not provide all information necessary to comprehend violations of Rust's safety rules.*

4 SURVEYING RUST PROGRAMMERS

We conducted an online survey on Qualtrics [44] to validate the findings presented in Section 3. The survey was approved by the institutional review board (IRB) office at the authors' university. This section gives the survey details and survey results.

4.1 Methodology

4.1.1 Recruitment. We required participants to be at least 18 years old, not be residing in the European Economic Area, and have some Rust coding experience. To recruit participants, we distributed our survey by posting threads on Rust-specific forums and newsletters,

Table 3: Program variants of PC and PD. ***PC-1 in Figure 1a and PD-1 in Figure 4 are the two base programs. (x, y) represents that x participants were assigned the original error messages and y participants were assigned the enhanced messages.***

ID	Root Cause	Code Construct	Err. Code	#Responses
PC-1	borrowing	function, array	E0502	34 (16, 18)
PC-2	move	function, array	E0508	31
PC-3	borrowing	local variable, array	E0502	32
PD-1	inter lifetime	function, annotation	E0499	36 (19, 17)
PD-2	move	function, annotation	E0382	29
PD-3	intra lifetime	closure, annotation	E0499	32

sending emails to programmers who recently committed code to open-source Rust projects, and contacting industrial collaborators.

4.1.2 Stimuli. We presented four Rust programs (PA, PB, PC, and PD) to each participant. All the programs were designed based on the studied Stack Overflow questions in Section 3. PB can be compiled, while the other three all contain safety-rule violations. PA is shown in Figure 2 and PB is shown in Figure 3. They are identical for all participants. PC and PD are sampled from two program sets. Each set contains a base program (PC-1 or PD-1) and two variant programs that are synthesized by changing either the base program's violated safety rule (PC-2 or PD-2) or involved code constructs (PC-3 or PD-3). Thus, we can compare survey results between a base program and its variants (*e.g.*, PC-1 vs. PC-3) to validate Finding 5 in Section 3.3.

Table 3 shows the information of program variants in the two sets. PC-1 is the program in Figure 1a and it is the base program in the PC set. The Rust compiler complains that a mutable reference to `out1` coexists with an immutable reference to `out1` with error code "E0502." We created PC-2 by changing function `test()` to move its first parameter. Then a different safety rule that states that an array element cannot be moved out of its array was violated (error code "E0508"). As shown in Figure 1a, we changed the code constructs involved in the error to create PC-3. We replaced the two function calls at lines 14 and 17 with several borrowing operations and assignments, with the purpose being to have `out1`'s mutable reference `r1` to coexist with `out1`'s immutable reference `r3`. In addition, we enhanced the compiler error messages of PC-1 by explicitly explaining that an array can only be borrowed as a whole in Rust (the green-colored rectangle in Figure 1b).

PD-1 in Figure 4 is the base program of the PD set. How we created PD-2 and PD-3 is similar to how we created PC-2 and PC-3. See Table 3 for the violated rules and involved code constructs.

4.1.3 Procedure. Our survey consisted of three phases. We discuss their details as follows.

Phase 1: Demographics and On-Board Experience in Rust. We collected demographic information at the beginning of the survey to validate whether participants were qualified. We asked participants to provide their age groups, locations, and years of Rust experience. If a participant did not satisfy any recruitment requirement, our survey automatically terminated. We then asked participants about their genders, races, and ethnic groups.

We gauged participants' expertise levels in Rust by asking them how long they have learned Rust, how often they program with Rust, how many lines of code are in the largest Rust programs they have written, and whether Rust is their most frequently used language. We also asked participants to self-rate their expertise on a 10-point scale ranging from 1 ("beginner") to 10 ("expert").

To examine participants' previous Rust coding experience, we asked participants how often they feel confused about Rust's ownership/lifetime rules and how often they can understand the compiler error messages when their code violates the safety rules. Possible options include "never", "sometimes", "most of the time", and "always." We also asked whether Rust has other language features they consider challenging.

Phase 2: Evaluating Rust Programs. We showed participants the four programs at this phase. We first asked them whether PA and PB could be compiled. We then explicitly told them that both PC and PD contained a safety-rule violation, and we asked them to answer the following six questions.

- **Q1:** We asked participants to highlight the program tokens that were the error's root cause (*i.e.*, tokens where safety rules were violated). Figure 1a and Figure 4 show our expected highlighting for PC-1 and PD-1, respectively.
- **Q2:** We requested participants to rate the difficulty of identifying the root cause on a 10-point scale, where "1" means "very easy" and "10" means "very difficult."
- **Q3:** We asked participants to choose the violated rule among ten options, which included the correct answer, four rules similar to the violated one, and five rules different from the violated one. The similarity between two safety rules was computed as the absolute value between their error codes [35].
- **Q4:** We asked participants to rate the difficulty of root cause identification again after showing them the compiler error messages. If PC-1 or PD-1 was sampled, either the original error messages or the enhanced version would be presented with equal probability.
- **Q5:** We requested participants to gauge the helpfulness of the error messages on a 10-point scale, where "1" means "not helpful" and "10" means "extremely helpful."
- **Q6:** In this open-ended question, we asked participants to describe how the safety rule was violated. We suggested they should consider in their answers the involved program constructs, how the rule was applied to the code context, and why the compiler highlighted some code.

Of the six questions, Q1, Q3, and Q6 had objectively correct answers, while the other three were subjective in nature. Q4–Q6 were asked after showing participants compiler error messages, and their results can reveal the effects of viewing the error messages.

Phase 3: Post-Session Questions. We asked about participants' overall technical background at this stage, including years of programming, favorite programming languages, self-rated programming expertise levels, how many lines of code are in the largest programs they have ever worked on, and job titles. We also asked participants why they learn or use Rust.

4.2 Survey Results

We distributed the survey from March 12 to April 6, 2021, and received 502 completed responses. Three paper authors inspected the responses together and identified 101 of them as valid. We focused our data analysis on the valid responses. Invalid responses included those that were finished in a very short time (*e.g.*, fewer

than five minutes), had open-ended question answers identical to other responses, or came from unwanted sources.

4.2.1 Phase 1. The majority of the 101 participants were male (91.1%) and in the 18–34 age range (85.1%). The top two most common locations were the U.S. (53.5%) and China (9.0%). Most participants were White (47.5%) or Asian (27.7%). There were also responses from Hispanics (5.9%) and African Americans (2.0%). Overall, the demographics of our participants revealed considerable diversity and reflected the demographic distribution of real-world Rust programmers [52, 53].

The participants were relatively experienced in Rust (69.3% had learned Rust for more than one year and 63.3% had implemented a Rust program with more than 1,000 lines of code). Rust was the most frequently used language for 48.5% of the participants, and 64.4% used Rust on a daily or weekly basis. The average level of self-rated Rust expertise was 5.3 out of 10, and the median was 6.

Most participants (85.1%) were at least "sometimes" confused by lifetime rules, but only 52.4% of them held the same feeling for ownership rules. A chi-squared test confirmed the difference was significant ($\chi^2_{(1)} = 23.6, p < 0.001$). Moreover, the proportion of participants who could "always" understand compiler errors for lifetime-rule violations (10.0%) was significantly smaller than the proportion of participants who could "always" understand compiler errors for ownership-rule violations (39.6%, $\chi^2_{(1)} = 22.4, p < 0.001$). These results are consistent with Finding 3 in Section 3.2.

Besides ownership and lifetime, other challenging language features mentioned by more than ten participants were Rust's type systems (26), asynchronous programming (25), trait bounds and generics (22), and macros (12).

4.2.2 Phase 2. Most (83.2%) of the participants correctly answered that PA could not be compiled, 77.2% correctly answered that PB could be compiled, and 70.3% correctly answered both of the two questions. These results show the participants had reasonably adequate knowledge of Rust.

As discussed in Section 4.1.2, PC and PD were sampled from two different program sets. Each set contained three program variants. Table 3 shows the number of participants assigned with each variant. We conducted a one-way ANOVA test for each combination of a program set and a research question (Q1–Q6). The null hypothesis was that there was no difference among the results obtained from the three variants. The significance level was 0.05. Since there were three pairwise comparisons in each program set, we adjusted all computed pairwise p-values using Bonferroni correction [8]. We denoted adjusted p-values using $p_{adj.}$. We mainly focused on (PC-1, PC-2), (PC-1, PC-3), (PD-1, PD-2), and (PD-1, PD-3), since variants in these pairs are different from each other in terms of either the violated rules or the involved code constructs (see Table 3).

Q1: Error Token Highlighting. We categorized program tokens into three types for grading: root-cause tokens, relevant tokens, and irrelevant tokens. Root-cause tokens represented where safety rules were violated (*e.g.*, the red-colored tokens in Figure 1a and Figure 4). Relevant tokens were those close to or related to root causes, but that did not directly cause programming errors (*e.g.*, the uncolored tokens at line 14 in Figure 1a). Considering participants might accidentally highlight extra tokens close to the root causes, we did not penalize the selection of relevant tokens. Irrelevant tokens had nothing to do with the root causes. Highlighting irrelevant tokens indicated participants' misunderstanding of programming errors, and thus we penalized the marking of irrelevant tokens. We computed a score for each answer by dividing the number of highlighted root-cause tokens by the number of highlighted root-cause tokens and irrelevant tokens. Scores ranged from 0 to 1, with larger scores representing better answers.

Table 4: Average scores and standard errors. ***Q1 and Q6 were manually graded with scores ranging from 0 to 1. Q3 was scored 0 or 1 on correctness. Q2, Q4, and Q5 are 10-point rating-scale questions. Standard errors are in parentheses. o (e) in a subscript denotes original (enhanced) error messages. Error messages were shown in between Q3 and Q4, and thus they did not impact Q1–Q3.***

ID	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6
PC-1	0.74 (0.06)	6.12 (0.44)	0.76 (0.07)	3.71 (0.47)	8.50 (0.32)	0.69 (0.05)
PC-1_o	-	-	-	3.46 (0.74)	8.93 (0.32)	0.56 (0.08)
PC-1_e	-	-	-	3.89 (0.62)	8.15 (0.51)	0.78 (0.07)
PC-2	0.39 (0.08)	5.27 (0.40)	0.48 (0.09)	4.03 (0.44)	7.45 (0.44)	0.56 (0.05)
PC-3	0.63 (0.06)	6.32 (0.37)	0.84 (0.06)	3.34 (0.41)	7.76 (0.40)	0.74 (0.03)
PD-1	0.53 (0.09)	7.63 (0.47)	0.22 (0.07)	5.28 (0.56)	7.19 (0.42)	0.66 (0.04)
PD-1_o	-	-	-	4.67 (0.86)	7.33 (0.63)	0.68 (0.04)
PD-1_e	-	-	-	5.82 (0.72)	7.06 (0.59)	0.65 (0.06)
PD-2	0.75 (0.07)	5.59 (0.51)	0.59 (0.09)	3.24 (0.46)	8.24 (0.38)	0.74 (0.05)
PD-3	0.46 (0.09)	7.09 (0.43)	0.37 (0.08)	4.57 (0.47)	6.83 (0.41)	0.58 (0.04)

The average highlighting scores fell in the range from 0.39 to 0.75 in Table 4, implying that applying Rust's safety rules and identifying error tokens are challenging in general (Finding 2 in Section 3.2).

The ANOVAs confirmed that the main effect of program variant was significant for both the PC set ($p = 0.004$) and the PD set ($p = 0.030$). Among the four comparison pairs, PC-1 and PC-2 were the only pair to have a significant difference with $p_{adj.}$ equal to 0.003. Since PC-1 and PC-2 shared the same code constructs but violated different safety rules (see Table 3), this result reveals that *different safety rules can have different difficulty levels when applied to the same code construct* (Finding 5 in Section 3.3).

To understand how different code constructs impacted root-cause highlighting, we further examined the highlighting results for the PC variants, since PC-1, PC-2, and PC-3 all contained two similar code constructs: array `out1.a` and tuple `out2.a`. For all of these variants, tokens related to the array were the root-cause tokens, while tokens related to the tuple (*e.g.*, the tokens at line 17 in Figure 1a) were irrelevant and misleading. We counted how many participants selected tuple-related tokens. The results for PC-1, PC-2, and PC-3 were 10, 9, and 14, respectively. Such results suggest that *programmers can be confused when applying the same safety rule to different code constructs*, explaining Finding 5 in Section 3.3.

Q2 & Q4: Difficulty Ratings. Column "Q2" in Table 4 shows the average difficulty ratings before participants saw the error messages. The main effect of program variant was significant for the PD set ($p = 0.009$) only. For the two comparison pairs in the PD set, PD-1 was significantly more difficult than PD-2 ($p_{adj.} = 0.01$), indicating that participants perceived the error due to "inter-procedural lifetime computation" to be more difficult to comprehend than the error caused by "violating a move rule" on the same code construct (Finding 3 in Section 3.2 and Finding 5 in Section 3.3). There was no significant difference between PD-1 and PD-3.

The average difficulty ratings showed the same pattern after participants viewed the error messages (column "Q4" in Table 4).

Q3: Violated Rule Selection. Column "Q3" in Table 4 shows the correct answer rates for selecting violated safety rules. The main effect of program variant was significant for both PC variants (p = 0.003) and PD variants (p = 0.008). Among the four comparison pairs, only the correct answer rate of PD-1 was significantly lower than that of PD-2 ($p_{adj.}$ = 0.008), demonstrating PD-1's violated safety rule was more difficult to identify than PD-2's (Finding 5).

To understand the difficulty in identifying violated rules, we inspected the wrongly selected options. In total, there were four wrong options chosen by at least five participants, one for PC-2, two for PD-1, and one for PD-3. PC-2 violated a move rule, but six participants thought an object was borrowed again after being mutably borrowed in PC-2, violating a borrowing rule. Those participants did not notice that function `test()` moved (not borrowed) its input in PC-2. The lifetime computation of a mutable reference in PD-1 was complex, and the lifetime overlapped with another mutable reference to the same object. However, seven participants thought the rule that had been violated was that an owner variable cannot be used after the ownership is borrowed. This rule was also violated in PD-1, but it was not as precise as the correct answer. Five participants thought a reference was used beyond the borrowed object's lifetime. The participants noticed that the lifetime computation was complex, so they guessed this lifetime rule was violated. For PD-3, six participants said that the violated rule was the one that forbids moving an object through a reference, but the program actually conducted a copy (not move). These results show that *without knowing the correct violated safety rule, programmers easily inspected a programming error in a wrong direction.*

Q5: Helpfulness of Compiler Error Messages. Column "Q5" in Table 4 shows the average helpfulness ratings of the error messages. PC-1 had the highest average rating (8.50), and PD-3 had the lowest average rating (6.83). The main effect of program variant was significant for the PD set (p = 0.039) only, and there was no significant difference for the four comparison pairs.

Q6: Error Description in Programmers' Own Words. We first developed a scoring rubric for grading. We identified two scoring schemes representing the "what" aspect and the "how" aspect of error root causes. We gave more weight to the "how" aspect (60%). For each theme, we defined three score levels (30%, 60%, and 100%) and formalized the criteria at each level. Based on the rubric, two paper authors graded participants' responses independently. The average percentage of agreement between the two graders was 50%. The two graders resolved the discrepancies between them by revisiting the criteria over multiple discussions.

Column "Q6" in Table 4 shows the average score for each program variant. The highest score was 0.74 for PD-2, and the lowest score was 0.56 for PC-2. The main effect of program variant was significant for both the PC set (p = 0.03) and the PD set (p = 0.03), but there was no significant difference for any comparison pairs.

We further inspected how participants answered Q6 together with their answers to previous questions to deeply understand participants' error comprehension process. For PC-2, six participants selected that a borrowing rule was violated in Q3, which was wrong, but five of them correctly mentioned move or ownership in their Q6 answers. We anticipated that the error messages helped the five participants figure out the correct root cause. For PD-1, five participants noticed the violation was due to the lifetime extension of the borrow of `bar2` at line 14 (Figure 4). However, they thought the extension was caused by the return at line 7, as indicated by their explanations of Q6. This understanding was wrong; the extension was actually caused by the lifetime annotations (*i.e.*, `'b`) at lines 4 and 5. This result demonstrates that *Rust's safety rules are complex in practice and that although programmers know that a safety rule has been violated, they may not know the true reason for the violation.*

Effect of Enhanced Error Messages. We created enhanced versions of compiler error messages for PC-1 and PD-1. Since the error messages were shown to participants after Q3, we compared the effects of the enhanced version and the original version on Q4–Q6 using two-sample t-tests. The enhanced version of PC-1 showed a significantly better average score than the original version on the objective question Q6 (p = 0.015). Moreover, four participants explicitly mentioned the extra information we provided in PC-1's error messages in their Q6 answers. These results confirm that *compiler error messages may not contain all necessary information for Rust programmers to debug safety-rule violations and that providing more facilitating information can improve programmers' performance* (Finding 6 in Section 3.4).

The enhanced error messages did not significantly impact participants' responses for either PC-1 or PD-1 on the two subjective questions (Q4 and Q5) or for PD-1 on Q6.

4.2.3 Phase 3. About 75.2% of the participants had at least three years' programming experience. The average self-rated programming expertise was 6.3 and the median was 7. A bit less than half (46.5%) of the participants had worked on a program with more than 10,000 lines of code. The general technical background of the participants was consistent with their Rust background as surveyed in Phase 1. The top two most common job titles/roles were "software engineers" (43.6%) and "students" (31.2%). Besides Rust, the top three programming languages with which the participants had the most experience were Python, C/C++, and JavaScript. The top three most favorite Rust features were safety, performance, and language features (*e.g.*, functional programming styles, pattern matching). These results match our expectations of Rust programmers.

5 DISCUSSION

This section discusses the implications of our studies, threats to its validity, and our procedures to reduce those threats' influence.

Implications to the Rust Community. Our findings can benefit the Rust community from four aspects. First, *Rust learners* can spend more effort on the pinpointed programming scenarios where a safety rule is especially challenging to gain a deeper understanding of the rule. Second, for *Rust programmers*, our findings can remind them not to rely solely on compiler feedback when debugging safety-rule violations, since the error messages may miss essential information to comprehending the violations. Third, *Rust language designers* can improve the Rust compiler by providing the missed information when reporting safety-rule violations. Fourth, *Rust researchers* can leverage our findings to build IDE tools and automated compiler-error fixing tools to improve Rust's programmability.

Values Beyond Rust. Our work can benefit other programming languages in two ways. First, we demonstrate how to statistically analyze Stack Overflow questions to identify programming challenges for Rust and use code constructs to describe when a safety rule is especially confusing. Future work can leverage similar methods to detect programming difficulties for other languages. Second, we construct pairs of program variants by changing code constructs or involved grammar to compare survey participants' performance in a controlled manner. Researchers and practitioners can use similar methods to build program variants in other programming languages for testing and learning purposes.

Threats to Validity. Similar to previous empirical studies and user studies, our findings need to be considered with our methodology in mind. They have several potential threats to their validity.

For internal validity threats, our survey participants might not have been representative enough, they might have referred to Rust tutorials in the survey, malicious persons or online bots might have submitted responses, and both the study on Stack Overflow questions and the grading of open-ended questions were based on subjective assessments. We took several methods to ensure internal validity. First, we recruited a relatively large number of participants from multiple channels. Second, we explicitly required participants not to refer to external resources multiple times in the survey. Third, three authors inspected all responses and filtered out the invalid ones together. Fourth, at least two authors studied each Stack Overflow question and graded each open-ended question.

There are two possible external threats to our study's validity. First, we mainly leveraged Stack Overflow questions for identifying programming challenges of Rust. Those questions could not be resolved by the questioners, and thus they may be more difficult than programming errors in daily practice. We also acknowledge that some of the programming challenges of Rust are never submitted to Stack Overflow and thus cannot be identified through studying Stack Overflow questions. Second, our survey was conducted on Qualtrics. Reading Rust code on Qualtrics is different from coding Rust in a real development environment. Thus, participants' performance in our study may not reflect their common behaviors.

6 RELATED WORK

User Studies on Rust. The Mozilla Rust team conducts annual surveys to understand Rust programmers' backgrounds and figure out ways to improve Rust. The survey in 2020 reported that *lifetime* and *ownership* are the two most difficult topics for programmers to grasp [53], which aligns with our observations in Section 3. Zeng and Crichton [73] analyzed Rust-related posts and comments collected from online Rust communities and identified several obstacles to the adoption of Rust. Crichton [13] conducted a case study to show the challenges of interpreting Rust's compiler error messages. Abtahi and Dietz [1] conducted a laboratory study to examine the methods employed by programmers when they learned Rust. They found that online code examples and compiler errors were helpful to Rust learners. They also reported that sometimes Rust learners found compiler error messages hard to interpret because the messages were full of terminologies. Fulton et al. [18] identified benefits and challenges of adopting Rust through a semi-structured interview and an online survey.

Our study differs from those existing ones in study goals. Specifically, we aim to identify programming challenges incurred by Rust's safety rules and pinpoint scenarios where a safety rule is more difficult to understand.

Empirical Studies on Rust Code. Researchers have conducted empirical studies to understand real-world Rust code from different points of view, like how unsafe code is used [3, 17, 40], how many Rust libraries depend on external C/C++ libraries [65], and the buggy code patterns of safety issues that bypass Rust's compiler checks [43, 71]. Those empirical studies focus on Rust programs that can be compiled. However, we focus on Rust programs that are rejected by the Rust compiler, because we aim to identify programming challenges imposed by Rust's compile-time checks.

Usability Studies on Programming Languages. Researchers conducted studies to understand how different factors (*e.g.*, syntax, APIs) impact programmers' learning and coding for other programming languages (*e.g.*, Java, C) [16, 23, 38, 39, 64]. These studies provide valuable findings and insights in improving software development processes. However, Rust is very different from those languages due to its unique grammar and its strict safety checks. For example, the majority of the confusing C code snippets studied by Gopstein et al. [23] cannot be compiled by the Rust compiler and thus cannot cause problems for Rust programmers anymore. Due to the difference, we believe a usability study (like ours) to understand how Rust's grammar and its safety checks impact its learning and programming is solely desired.

Comprehending Compiler Errors. Researchers performed several studies to understand how programmers interpret compiler error messages for traditional programming languages (*e.g.*, C/C++) [4, 5]. However, there is no similar study for Rust. Rust features strict compile-time checks that depend on complex safety rules. Compiler error messages are critical feedback for programmers, especially when it comes to safety-rule violations. Thus, it is particularly important to study how Rust programmers comprehend compiler error messages and to improve error messages accordingly.

Leveraging and Improving Stack Overflow. Stack Overflow is an open community for developers to ask technical questions and share their knowledge [60]. Previous researchers leveraged Stack Overflow data to understand real-world development problems [2, 14, 25, 66, 72, 74] and built tools to improve the usages of Stack Overflow [6, 24, 47, 70, 75]. However, there is no prior work on studying Rust-related Stack Overflow questions and our study in Section 3 is the first one to examine those questions.

7 CONCLUSION

Rust conducts extensive static checks at the compile time to catch memory-safety and thread-safety issues. Given the increasing popularity of Rust, it is critical to understand the language's learning and programming challenges, especially those posed by its safety checks and the underlying safety mechanism. For this purpose, we conduct the first comprehensive, empirical study on Rust-related Stack Overflow questions. We expect that our findings can guide the learning, programming, and compiler evolution of Rust. In addition, we further perform a survey with 101 Rust programmers and confirm many of our findings with significant confidence.

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