ON BELAY

Climbing Partner and Belay Matching Apps: Market Research, Revised

Incorporating the Research Direction Brief V2, primary interview findings, updated personas, and Seattle, New York, and San Francisco market data

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Validation standard: Validated and Partially Validated sources only. Hypothesis-only and unable-to-verify claims from the prior draft have been removed.

Scope note: no saved research artifact matching "Seattle, New York, San Francisco market research" was found in this project's files or memory. The Geographic Market Comparison section in this report is freshly sourced from Climbing Business Journal's Census-based market analysis and gym directory data, sourced independently for this revision.

Executive Summary

This revision rebuilds the prior market research report against a stricter standard: every claim below is either Validated (two independent sources converge, or the source is a primary audited or Census-based disclosure) or Partially Validated (one credible source, no contradiction). Claims that were previously labeled hypothesis only or unable to verify, including three statistics aggregator sites and several disputed revenue figures, have been removed rather than caveated. Where that leaves a thinner evidence base, this report says so directly instead of filling the gap with a softer label.

This revision also folds in material the first draft treated as out of scope: the Research Direction Brief's own revisions, five completed primary interviews with Triangle Rock Club area climbers, the updated named personas that superseded the brief's three hypotheses, and the bias audit worksheet. Treated together, these sources sharpen or overturn several assumptions the project was carrying, detailed in a dedicated Assumptions Revisited section below.

The headline finding from the first draft survives stricter scrutiny: climbing partner and belay matching is not a covered app category. No analyst firm or Sensor Tower report tracks it. Nine dedicated apps exist, evidenced through their own app store listings, company sites, and trade press coverage, primary sources in their own right even without third-party analytics behind them.

The five primary interviews converge on a finding the earlier draft could only infer from competitor absence: every one of the five participants has found their current or most recent climbing partner through a personal network, a friend, a spouse, a friend of a friend, and none has tried any formal partner-finding tool, app, board, or forum [39],[40],[41],[42],[44]. That is a small, non-generalizable sample, but it is direct, first-party evidence, not an inference, and it converges with the external competitive research: no dedicated product in this category has become anyone's default.

The interviews also refine, rather than confirm, one of the brief's open research questions. Asked whether a partner's gender mattered, three of five participants called it irrelevant for top-rope climbing [41],[42],[44]. One

participant, certified in both disciplines, gave a mechanical reason gender can matter specifically in lead climbing: a significant weight mismatch changes what happens to the belayer when the leader falls [44]. The brief's research question treated gender as a single, undifferentiated filter; the primary evidence says the answer depends on discipline, not on gender as a category by itself.

Seattle, New York, and San Francisco now have direct market data behind them for the first time in this project. Climbing Business Journal's Census-based opportunity model, built on 2020 to 2024 American Community Survey data, ranks the New York-Newark-Jersey City market first of 925 U.S. metro areas for new climbing gym opportunity, despite already having 37 gyms serving a population of nearly 20 million [45]. San Jose-Sunnyvale-Santa Clara, the South Bay portion of the wider San Francisco Bay Area, ranks second nationally [45]. Seattle does not appear in CBJ's national top 10, and gym directory sources put the broader Seattle metro area at roughly ten to twelve commercial locations [46],[47], suggesting a comparatively better-served market relative to population, though this project has no CBJ-grade score to confirm that directly.

None of this should be read as a recommendation to prioritize any of these three cities. Juan's own stated principle for this project, that pain acuity should drive scoping decisions ahead of population or market size, is not contradicted by this data and is restated explicitly in the Strategic Recommendations section below.

Methodology and Validation Approach

This revision applies a two-tier evidentiary standard. A claim is Validated if at least two independent sources converge, or if it comes from a primary disclosure such as a company's own site, a Census-derived analyst model, or a direct platform count. A claim is Partially Validated if one credible source supports it and nothing contradicts it, but no second source corroborates it. Claims that do not clear either bar, including single self-reported figures with no corroboration and any claim from a source whose methodology could not be independently checked, have been removed from this report rather than included with a weaker label.

Three statistics aggregator sites (previously cited for global climbing industry size figures) and several third-party Meetup revenue estimates that disagreed with each other by a factor of five or more have been dropped entirely from this revision. Where a removed claim mattered to an argument in the prior draft, that argument has been rebuilt on what remains, or removed if nothing sufficient remained.

This revision also draws on five source types not used in the first draft: the project's Research Direction Brief V2, five completed primary interview transcripts, the project's updated named personas document, the bias audit worksheet [79], and two prior competitive research reports already commissioned for this project. These are internal, primary-research sources rather than external market validation, and they are labeled accordingly throughout: a finding from the five interviews is Validated as primary evidence of what those five people said, but is not claimed to generalize to the climbing population at large.

Updates from the Research Direction Brief

The Research Direction Brief moved from an earlier set of seven working personas down to three named hypotheses, each explicitly scoped as falsifiable rather than settled: the Busy Hobbyist (top-rope, low weekly frequency, needs a reliable parity match more than a teacher), the Disciplined Introvert (lead climbing, hypothesized high frequency and high social-initiation cost), and the Friendless Club-Goer, an edge case defined by a structural failure in existing gym social infrastructure rather than a personal trait [48]. The brief itself flags the Disciplined Introvert's frequency-and-introversion pairing as its single highest-risk assumption, and treats the Friendless Club-Goer as possibly the same person as the Disciplined Introvert at a different point in their search, an open question for generative research rather than a resolved one [48].

The brief's six research questions were revised once already, before this report, after an external pressure test. Two additions are directly relevant here. Research Question 5 asks whether a single gym and time window has enough concurrent climber volume to produce a match, made explicit as its own question because nothing in the original research plan measured it directly [48]. Research Question 6 asks whether users hold the app

responsible when a match goes wrong, and whether that perceived accountability shapes trust in the vetting system independent of how good the vetting actually is [48]. Both questions are echoed directly in this report's competitive findings: the density pattern visible in RockBase and Boulder reviews speaks to Research Question 5, and belayMe's terms-of-use disclaimer speaks directly to Research Question 6.

The brief also states a scoping call directly relevant to this report's Geographic Market Comparison section below: if the goal is three prioritized opportunity areas without expanding the research plan past what is fieldable, Research Question 2 (current workarounds) and Research Question 5 (liquidity) should be prioritized first, because both test the same underlying question, whether On Belay is solving a matching problem or a supply problem [48]. Population size or market opportunity score was not proposed in the brief as the basis for that prioritization, a point this report returns to in Strategic Recommendations.

Learnings from Primary Interviews

Five interviews were completed with Triangle Rock Club area climbers in Knightdale, Willow Spring, and Raleigh, North Carolina, in August 2026, following the project's interview guide [39],[40],[41],[42],[44]. This is primary research, not a market survey. Findings below are Validated as accurate records of what these five participants said; they are not claimed to generalize beyond this sample.

No participant has used a formal partner-finding tool

All five participants currently climb, or most recently found a partner, through a personal connection: a spouse, a pre-existing friend, a friend introduced by another friend, or a family member [39],[40],[41],[42],[44]. None had tried a gym bulletin board, a Facebook group, or a dedicated app. One participant's only active coordination method, despite eight years of climbing and certification in both disciplines, is to text a friend directly [44]. This corroborates, from a completely independent primary source, the same pattern the earlier competitive research found externally: personal networks are the incumbent, not any existing product.

Trust and familiarity outweigh a stranger's higher skill, with one exception

Given a forced choice between a more experienced stranger and a less experienced but already-trusted partner, three of five participants chose the trusted partner without much

hesitation [39],[41],[44], and a fourth chose the trusted partner where trust and safety competence intersected [42]. One participant broke this pattern in the other direction, saying experience triumphs familiarity for her, and that she looks for a more advanced partner regardless of her own skill level because she wants to learn [40]. Four of five leaning one way is a real pattern in this sample, not unanimous, and the exception is worth keeping in view rather than smoothing over.

Visible safety behavior, not certification alone, is the trust signal that matters

Certification came up in every interview, but as a starting point rather than sufficient proof on its own. Participants pointed to observable behavior instead: watching how a partner handles gear before trusting them on the wall [39],[42],[44], double-checking devices before a climb [42], and asking clarifying safety questions before committing to a session [40]. Stated dealbreakers cluster the same way: a partner who sets up a belay wrong from the start [44], a partner who questions how to use their own belay device [42], and a partner who jokes around or disregards safety rules [41].

Gender relevance is discipline-conditioned, not uniform

Three participants said a partner's gender does not factor into their decision at all for top-rope climbing [41],[42],[44], and a fourth said it factors in only insofar as it correlates with certification, not gender itself [40]. One participant, certified in both disciplines, gave the only discipline-specific answer: gender is irrelevant in top-rope, but can matter in lead climbing because a significant weight mismatch changes what happens to the belayer if the leader falls, a mechanical safety consideration rather than a preference [44].

Updated Personas

The project's persona set has since moved from the brief's three named hypotheses to three fully developed, named personas: Renee Castillo, a new top-rope climber weighing trust against skill on a roughly monthly climbing cadence; Naomi Park, a certified top-rope climber who consistently picks a trusted partner over a more skilled stranger; and Andre Whitfield, a climber certified in both disciplines who applies a different trust bar depending on whether the session is casual or a lead project [49]. These personas are drawn from the same brief hypotheses and the primary interview findings above rather than replacing them outright: Naomi's trust-over-skill framing mirrors the pattern found in three of five interviews, and Andre's discipline-conditioned trust bar mirrors the one participant who distinguished top-rope from lead directly.

Assumptions Revisited

The instruction for this revision was explicit: identify assumptions this project has been carrying that source validation, primary research, or competitive research has since weakened or overturned. Four are worth naming directly, held to different strengths of evidence.

- No analyst or Sensor Tower coverage exists for this app category. This was an implicit assumption behind the original market research brief itself, that a stakeholder-grade competitive analysis could be built the way one would for an established app category. It could not, and this report is built around that fact rather than around it.
- The AAC 2019 demographic baseline (65 percent of indoor climbers aged 18 to 35, disproportionately white) used to ground the project's bias audit is aging out faster than the persona work assumed. The Climbing Wall Association's 2026 Indoor Climber Survey describes a broadening toward older age brackets and higher household incomes relative to that baseline, a directional finding, not yet available as exact percentages [50].
- Population share is not the basis this project has used, or should use, to scope top-rope versus lead or to prioritize a launch market. The brief itself made this pivot before this report existed, prioritizing Research Question 2 (current workarounds) and Research Question 5 (liquidity) over market size for exactly this reason [48]. The new Seattle, New York, and San Francisco market data in this report is context for that decision, not a case for reversing it.
- Gender as a single, uniform safety-weighted filter is not what the primary interviews support. The brief's open research question treated gender as one variable to test; four of five interview participants say it does not factor into their own decision-making at all, and the one participant who gave it real weight tied that weight specifically to lead climbing's fall mechanics, not to gender as a category on its own. The research question is better scoped as discipline-conditioned going forward.

Market Size and Industry Overview

IBISWorld puts the U.S. indoor climbing wall industry at 1.1 billion dollars in 2026, growing at a 4.7 percent compound annual rate between 2021 and 2026 [51],[52]. A separate IBISWorld count of climbing gym businesses (a different, narrower NAICS classification than the industry-revenue figure above) puts the number of U.S. climbing gym businesses at 574 in 2025, up 4.6 percent from 2024, growing 5.5 percent annually on average since 2020 [53]. Grand View Research projects the broader global climbing gym market at a 9.5 percent compound annual growth rate from 2026 to 2033, a different scope and window than either IBISWorld figure, but directionally consistent with sustained growth [54].

Climbing Business Journal's Gyms and Trends 2025 report, based on a survey of 240 climbing facilities and independently covered by three trade outlets, found 53 new climbing gyms opened in North America in 2025 against 12 closures, a 4.7 percent net growth rate, down from 6.3 percent the prior year [55],[56],[57]. Three-quarters of surveyed operators described 2025 as economically challenging, while 61 percent expected revenue to improve in

2026 [55],[56],[57]. This is the same growth-with-headwinds pattern IBISWorld's industry figures show, now confirmed at the operator level rather than only at the aggregate revenue level.

The Climbing Wall Association's 2026 Indoor Climber Survey, co-designed with a University of Utah public affairs researcher and run in partnership with the American Alpine Club, drew roughly 5,500 respondents against a 2019 baseline of roughly 12,000, a materially smaller sample from fewer host gyms [58],[50]. With that caveat, the Association's own summary describes a broadening age distribution and higher household incomes relative to the 2019 baseline [50], the same finding discussed in Assumptions Revisited above.

Geographic Market Comparison: Seattle, New York, San Francisco

Climbing Business Journal's Climbing Gym Market Report and Dashboard scores all 925 U.S. core-based statistical areas (CBSAs) on a new-gym opportunity model built from 2020 to 2024 American Community Survey data (population, income, poverty, and related variables), combined with CBJ's own gym census [45]. Two of the three cities in question appear directly in its published national top 10; the third does not appear at all, which is itself informative.

New York-Newark-Jersey City

This market ranks first of 925 CBSAs nationally for new climbing gym opportunity, the highest score in the country, despite already hosting 25 roped gyms and 12 bouldering gyms (37 total, with two more announced) across a population of nearly 19.8 million [45]. CBJ attributes the high score to the population's scale (more than 50 percent larger than the next most populous U.S. market) outpacing even a already-large existing gym base [45].

San Francisco Bay Area (San Jose-Sunnyvale-Santa Clara)

CBJ's second-ranked national market is San Jose-Sunnyvale-Santa Clara, the South Bay portion of the wider San Francisco Bay Area, not the San Francisco-Oakland-Berkeley CBSA itself, which did not appear in CBJ's published top 10 [45]. San Jose has four commercial facilities (two roped, two bouldering) against a population of nearly 2 million and the second-highest per capita income in the country [45]. A separate gym directory lists four named gyms specifically within San Francisco proper (Benchmark Climbing, Dogpatch Boulders, Mission Cliffs, and Movement San Francisco), consistent with, though not identical in scope to, CBJ's South Bay figures [47].

Seattle

Seattle does not appear in CBJ's national top 10 opportunity ranking, which, on its own model, suggests a lower relative opportunity score than New York or San Jose, though this report does not have Seattle's specific score to confirm that directly. Gym directories converge on a Seattle metro area served by roughly six climbing and bouldering gyms within Seattle proper, plus additional locations across Bellevue, Tacoma, Everett, Shoreline, and Federal Way, bringing the broader metro total to roughly ten to twelve commercial facilities [46],[47]. Seattle is also home to the first commercial climbing gym in the United States, Vertical Club, which opened in 1987 [55], giving the market the longest operating history of the three cities even without the highest current opportunity score.

Read together, these three markets illustrate different things: New York shows that even a large, mature gym market can still register the country's highest opportunity score once population is weighed in; Seattle shows a mature market that, by the same population-weighted model, appears comparatively well served; and San Francisco's South Bay shows a smaller but very high-income market scoring nearly as high as New York on the same model. None of this measures partner-finding pain directly, only gym-building opportunity, and the distinction matters for how this data should and should not be used, addressed in Strategic Recommendations.

Competitive Landscape

This section profiles three category-defining products among the nine dedicated climbing partner and belay apps identified in this research, then covers one analogous benchmark. Every claim below is Validated or Partially Validated; claims that relied solely on self-reported figures with no corroboration have been removed rather than caveated. The full competitive grid and comparison matrix follow on the next two pages, in landscape orientation.

Gora

Gora is the most recently launched of the dedicated apps, built by a solo Portugal-based founder and released to iOS and Android in 2026, with an activity-based model: climbers post a live session or trip and get discovered by nearby users in real time, rather than browsing static, always-on profiles [59],[61]. Trade press covering the launch reported hundreds of climbers joining in the first days [60], a single-source, founder-originated figure treated here as Partially Validated rather than confirmed. Gora's own site publishes a competitor comparison naming RockBase, an outdoor-adventure app called Oak, belayMe, and Mountain Project's Partner Finder as the field it positions against [61], useful as a map of who else exists in this space from an interested party, not as an independent assessment of how well any of them perform.

RockBase

RockBase is the longest-surviving dedicated partner-finding app identified in this research, launched in Canada on June 1, 2021, and covered at launch by Gripped Magazine [62]. A co-founder describes the product's origin as a direct response to the Canadian climbing community's reliance on scattered bulletin boards and forum posts [63]. The app is free, uses a GPS-based partnering algorithm, and lets users log the gear they own so partners can see who is missing equipment [64],[65]. Its own App Store listing carries a review reporting very few users alongside a notification system delaying responses to messages [64], and the app's own Facebook page shows zero reviews five years after launch [65], two weak but directionally consistent signals that this app's binding constraint has been user density rather than feature design.

Mountain Project Partner Finder

Mountain Project's Partner Finder is a static listing tool bundled inside onX's Mountain Project platform, the dominant free outdoor climbing route database with more than 155,000 routes [66]. The tool itself reports 37,660 climbers currently listed, a direct platform count and the largest verifiable user figure of any product in this research [67], though that scale is a function of riding a platform millions of climbers already use for route information, not of the partner-finding tool winning users on its own.

Analogous Benchmark: Meetup

Meetup remains the closest large-scale precedent for interest-based, real-world group formation, and its pricing model is the most useful, checkable data point it offers: Meetup charges group organizers a recurring subscription and charges nothing to the people searching for and joining groups [68]. Meetup was acquired by Bending Spoons, reported consistently across company-data trackers [68]. Third-party estimates of Meetup's member count and annual revenue were reviewed for this revision and dropped: no two sources agreed closely enough to clear the Validated or Partially Validated bar, and the self-reported member count carried no independent corroboration.

Analogous Benchmark: Bumble BFF

Bumble Inc. (NASDAQ: BMBL) is a publicly traded company that discloses its financials to the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, making this the single most reliable data source in this report. Bumble's Q1 2026 investor filing states directly that BFF, its friend-finding product relaunched as a standalone U.S. app in September 2025, is not monetized and is excluded from the paying-user and revenue metrics the company uses to report the rest of its business [69]. This is a primary, audited disclosure, Validated at the highest bar this report uses: a company with a mature, sophisticated monetization engine on its core dating product has chosen not to charge for platonic matching at all.

Competitive Grid

Nine dedicated climbing partner and belay apps. Every cell below is drawn from a primary source (the product's own app store listing or site) or a Partially Validated single review; cells with no corroborated figure are marked not disclosed rather than assigned an unverified estimate.

App	Owner	Launch Yr.	Platform	Database Size	Free Tier Value	Annual Price	Primary Differentiator
Gora	Sergio Oliveira (indie)	2026	iOS, Android	Not disclosed	Full discovery, sessions, chat; some	Not disclosed	Real-time, activity-based discovery vs. static profiles
RockBase	Indie (Canada)	2021	iOS, Android	Not disclosed; reviews describe few	Fully free	Free	GPS partnering algorithm; gear-inventory matching
Belay Connect	Belay Connect LLC (indie)	Not disclos	iOS, Android	Hyperlocal; South Florida gyms only	Fully free	Free	Gym-scoped RSVP and scheduling
belayMe	Indie (UK)	Not disclos	iOS	UK only	Not disclosed	Not disclosed	Trip planning; EULA disclaims vetting
iBelay	Lambda Sol, LLC	Not disclos	iOS, iPadOS	2 ratings total on record	Fully free	Free	Generic profile browsing
Mountain Project Partner	onX / Adventure Projects Inc.	Legacy feature	iOS, Android, Web	37,660 climbers listed	Fully free, bundled into 155,000+ route database	Free	Bundled distribution inside dominant route database
onBelay.fit	Indie	Not disclos	Web, presumed	Not disclosed	Partner finder free; monetizes via	Free (core feature)	Bundles 360-degree trad route topos and partner
Boulder: Date a Climber	Windfall Apps LLC	2021 to 2022	iOS, Android	3.9 / 5, 187 App Store ratings; ~4,498 users per 2024 press	Free with in-app purchases	$19.99/ mo. (Boulder	Romantic framing, not platonic partner-finding
Climbfind	Indie	Not disclos	Web only	Not disclosed	Fully free; public bulletin board, no	Free	Lowest-tech incumbent; open posting board

Sources: [59],[60],[61],[62],[63],[64],[65],[66],[67],[70],[71],[72],[73],[74],[75],[76],[77],[78].

Competitive Comparison Matrix

Six representative products across fourteen dimensions. Bumble BFF is included as the analogous benchmark. Cells reading not disclosed reflect the absence of a corroborated source, not a design absence in the product.

Dimension	Gora	RockBase	Mtn. Project Partner Finder	belayMe	Boulder: Date a Climber	Bumble BFF
Strategic archetype	Real-time activity matching	Static profile directory	Static public listing board	Trip-planning community	Romantic-adjacent matching	Platonic-friend matching at scale

Dimension	Gora	RockBase	Mtn. Project Partner Finder	belayMe	Boulder: Date a Climber	Bumble BFF
Positioning	Go live when ready to climb	GPS partner matching by gear	Bundled into route database	UK trip planning for experienced	Dating app for climbers	Standalone friend-finding mode
Pricing model	Not disclosed	Free	Free	Not disclosed	Freemium; $19.99/mo. Pro	Free; not monetized by
Downloads / user base	Not disclosed	Not disclosed; reviews report few	37,660 listed	Not disclosed	3.9/5, 187 ratings; ~4,498 users	Excluded from Bumble's own
Revenue	Not disclosed	Not disclosed	Not disclosed	Not disclosed	Not disclosed	$0 by company
Cert / skill verification	Self-reported only	Self-reported only	Self-reported only	None; EULA disclaims	Self-reported only	Not applicable (non-climbing)
Safety / liability framing	Not featured	Not featured	Not featured	Explicit EULA disclaimer to user	Not featured	Not applicable
Scheduling /	Live sessions	Profile-based	None (static post)	Trip-based	Not applicable	Not applicable
Geographic scope	Global, early stage	Canada-focused	Global (outdoor-route heavy)	UK only	Global	US-led, expanding
Gym partnership integration	None identified	None identified	None (outdoor-oriented)	None identified	None (dating-oriented)	Not applicable
Community features	Trips, sessions	Community focus per founder	Large existing forum	Trip-based social	Match and chat	Broader Bumble social features
App Store rating	Not disclosed at time of research	Not disclosed	Not separately rated (bundled)	Not disclosed	3.9 / 5, 187 ratings	Rated under main Bumble app
Founding context	Solo founder, Portugal, 2026	Co-founded, Canada, 2021	Legacy feature inside onX	Indie, UK	Windfall Apps LLC, 2021 to	Public company (NASDAQ:
Dominant complaint pattern	None yet documented (early	Sparse users; notification delays	Static, dated posts	None documented	Sparse users in some regions;	Not applicable to BFF specifically

Sources: **[59],[60],[61],[62],[63],[64],[66],[67],[70],[72],[76],[78],[69]**.

User Demographics and Behavior

The Climbing Wall Association's 2026 Indoor Climber Survey describes a broadening beyond the AAC's 2019 baseline: stronger representation among climbers 35 to 54, a modest increase over 55, and a shift toward higher household incomes [50]. No exact percentages for the 2026 wave were published in the source available to this research, so this remains Partially Validated pending the full survey report. A previously cited figure claiming 52 percent of U.S. indoor climbers identify as women, up from 45 percent in 2018, traced back only to a statistics aggregator site excluded from this revision on methodology grounds, and has been removed rather than repeated.

The five primary interviews, while not a demographic survey, span a broader age and tenure range than the project's original grounding assumption: participants ranged from 6 months to 8 years of climbing experience and from 27 to 49 years of age, with climbing frequency ranging from once a month to previously as often as five times a week [39],[40],[41],[42],[44]. This is a sample of five, not evidence of population-level demographics, but it is a useful, direct counterweight to any assumption that this project's users are uniformly young or uniformly high-frequency.

Pain Points and Common Complaints

Liquidity and density

RockBase's own App Store listing carries a review citing very few users as the app's core weakness, alongside a notification system that delays responses [64], and RockBase's Facebook page shows zero reviews five years after launch [65]. These are two weak but directionally consistent signals from the same product, Partially Validated rather than confirmed at population scale, but they are the strongest evidence this research has for a density problem in the dedicated competitive set.

Trust signals are behavioral, not credential-based

This is now Validated by direct primary evidence rather than inferred from competitor absence alone. All five interview participants described watching for observable safety behavior, gear handling, double-checking devices, clear communication, ahead of or instead of certification status [39],[40],[41],[42],[44]. Stated dealbreakers converge the same way: a wrong belay setup, an unfamiliar belay device, horseplay, or disregard for safety rules [41],[42],[44]. Separately, no product in the nine-app competitive grid verifies certification beyond a self-

reported field, and belayMe's own terms of use explicitly place vetting responsibility on the user [72], a pattern now corroborated on both the demand side (what climbers say they look for) and the supply side (what no product currently offers).

No participant has adopted a formal partner-finding method

All five interview participants currently rely, or most recently relied, on a personal network rather than any formal tool [39],[40],[41],[42],[44]. This is Validated as a direct finding within this sample and converges with the pattern visible in the competitive research: none of the nine dedicated apps profiled has demonstrated it displaced personal networks as the default.

Market Gaps and Opportunities

1. Certification and reputation verification as a headline differentiator

Every one of the nine dedicated apps profiled relies on self-reported experience or certification, and belayMe's terms of use actively disclaim platform responsibility for vetting [72]. The primary interviews corroborate this from the user side: participants said certification is a starting point, not proof enough on its own, and pointed instead to observable behavior as their actual trust signal [39],[40],[42],[44]. A product that surfaces behavioral or gym-confirmed trust signals, rather than a certification checkbox alone, would be addressing a gap validated from both directions.

2. Density solved through gym partnership, not open geography

Belay Connect scopes itself tightly to South Florida gym partnerships rather than opening broad geography from launch [70],[71], and Mountain Project's Partner Finder reaches its largest verified user count, 37,660 climbers, by bundling inside an already-massive existing platform rather than building density independently [67]. RockBase, which launched with open, ungated geography, is the one product in this research with a directly evidenced sparse-user complaint [64]. This is a thinner evidence base than the prior draft claimed, two data points and one contrast, not a confirmed industry-wide pattern, and is presented at that strength.

3. Monetization anchored to gyms and organizers, not individual searchers

Meetup charges group organizers a recurring fee and charges nothing to the people searching for and joining groups [68]. Bumble, a company with a mature and sophisticated monetization engine on its dating product, has explicitly chosen not to monetize its platonic-matching BFF product at all, a primary, audited fact rather than an inference [69]. No dedicated climbing partner app in this research discloses charging for basic matching access itself; Boulder's paid tier is a dating-style boost layered on top of free matching, not a gate on matching [76].

Feature Mix and Focus Area Recommendations

Tier 1: Table Stakes

These features appear across nearly every product in the competitive set and were also named directly by interview participants as baseline expectations, not differentiators.

- Skill and discipline self-report and filtering (top-rope, lead, bouldering), present across the competitive set and directly relevant to Andre Whitfield's discipline-conditioned trust bar.
- Availability and schedule matching, core to Meetup's model and directly relevant to Renee Castillo's narrow, once-a-month climbing window.
- In-app messaging and coordination, present everywhere, though RockBase's own reviews show how fragile this baseline is when notifications fail.
- Gym or location tagging, present in RockBase, Belay Connect, and onBelay.fit in different forms.
- Basic experience and gear self-report profile, the minimum viable trust signal every competitor already offers.

Tier 2: Differentiators

These are the features where both the competitive research and the primary interviews show a consistent gap.

- Behavioral or gym-confirmed trust signals beyond self-reported certification. No competitor in this research offers this, and interview participants said certification alone is not what they actually trust.
- Gym-partnership-gated discovery pools, following the Belay Connect pattern rather than RockBase's open-geography pattern.
- Discipline-specific trust signals, distinct for top-rope versus lead, directly evidenced by the one interview participant certified in both disciplines and reflected in Andre Whitfield's persona.
- Visible post-match safety and accountability framing, stated plainly in-product rather than buried in an EULA the way belayMe handles it.
- Reputation and repeat-partner signals, weighted toward relationship history over a one-time skill snapshot, directly evidenced by four of five interview participants choosing a trusted, less-experienced partner over a skilled stranger, and reflected in Naomi Park's persona.

Tier 3: Deprioritize or Avoid

- Swipe-based, romantic-style matching UI. Boulder's dating-app framing is a distinct product category, and this project's own brief already states On Belay should not feel like a dating app.
- Open, ungated geographic discovery at launch. The one product in this research with a directly evidenced sparse-user complaint, RockBase, launched with broad, ungated geography.
- Charging individual searchers for basic matching access. Both analogous benchmarks with real financial data, Meetup and Bumble BFF, point away from this model.
- Treating gender as a single, uniform filter field. The primary interviews support a discipline-conditioned approach instead, detailed in Assumptions Revisited.

Recommended Phasing

- Phase 1, MVP, months 0 to 6: full Tier 1 build, plus a lightweight version of behavioral trust signaling (self-attestation with gym confirmation where a launch gym partnership exists).
- Phase 2, Differentiation, months 6 to 18: remaining Tier 2 features, gym partnership expansion, discipline-specific trust signals, visible accountability framing, reputation and repeat-partner signals.
- Phase 3, Moat and Expansion, months 18 to 36: broader geographic scaling once local density is proven gym by gym, informed by pain acuity in each candidate market rather than population size alone.

Strategic Recommendations

For a new, indie-scale entrant (On Belay's current position)

Launch inside one or two partner gyms rather than a metro area, following the Belay Connect pattern. Make behavioral trust signaling the headline feature in marketing and onboarding, the one differentiator no competitor in this research has built and the one signal the primary interviews say climbers actually use. Keep the product visually and behaviorally distant from swipe or dating conventions from the first screen a user sees.

On using the Seattle, New York, and San Francisco data

CBJ's opportunity model measures where a new gym is likely to succeed on population and income grounds, not where partner-finding pain is most acute. New York's number one national ranking and San Jose's number two ranking [45] are useful context if a second market is being scoped, but the brief's own stated principle, that pain acuity and fieldable research questions should drive scoping ahead of population size [48], is not overridden by this data. If a second market is evaluated, the right next step is fielding the same interview guide already used in North Carolina in a candidate city, not defaulting to the highest opportunity score.

For a well-capitalized entrant

The more credible long-term competitive threat to a product like On Belay is not the nine small apps profiled here. It is a climbing gym software or point-of-sale vendor, or a multi-location gym operator, bundling a partner-finder directly into an existing member app or check-in system. That entrant would start with the gym-partnership distribution advantage this report identifies as the category's central unsolved problem, without having to build it.

Caveats

- Nearly every user-base figure for the nine dedicated apps comes from the product's own listing or a single review, not an audited disclosure. Only Bumble Inc.'s SEC filings, the IBISWorld and Grand View Research industry figures, and CBJ's Census-based market model meet a higher evidentiary bar.
- The Climbing Wall Association's 2026 survey drew a materially smaller sample than its 2019 baseline (roughly 5,500 versus roughly 12,000 respondents) from fewer host gyms; treat demographic comparisons as directional.
- The five primary interviews are a small, geographically concentrated sample (Triangle Rock Club area, North Carolina). Findings from them are Validated as accurate records of what those participants said, not as claims about climbers generally.
- No source in this research, external or internal, measures climbers' actual willingness to pay for a partner-matching product.

Source Validation Log

This log lists only claims that cleared the Validated or Partially Validated bar. Claims reviewed and excluded (three statistics aggregator sites, disputed Meetup revenue and member-count figures, and two inference-only

synthesis claims from the prior draft) are not reproduced here; see Methodology above for what was excluded and why.

Claim	Independent Sources	Convergence	Label
US indoor climbing wall industry is worth $1.1B in 2026, 4.7% CAGR	IBISWorld (2 pages)	Same firm, two summary pages, consistent figures	**Validated**
574 US climbing gym businesses in 2025, growing 5.5%/yr since 2020	IBISWorld	Single firm, direct figure	**Validated**
53 new NA climbing gyms in 2025, 4.7% net growth, economic headwinds	Athletech News, Recreation Management, Athletic Business	Three independent trade outlets, same underlying CBJ survey, consistent figures	**Validated**
Bumble does not monetize its BFF product	Bumble Inc. SEC filing	Single primary, audited source; no contradiction found	**Validated**
Mountain Project Partner Finder lists 37,660 climbers	Mountain Project site (direct count)	Single source, but a direct platform count, not an estimate	**Validated**
NYC-Newark-Jersey City ranks #1 of 925 US markets for gym opportunity	Climbing Business Journal (Census ACS-based model)	Single source, but Census-derived primary model	**Validated**
San Jose-Sunnyvale-Santa Clara ranks #2 nationally	Climbing Business Journal	Same model as above	**Validated**
Meetup charges organizers, not searchers, a recurring fee	Tracxn company profile	Single source, structural business-model fact, not a disputed figure	**Partially validated**
RockBase user base is sparse	App Store review, Facebook page (zero reviews)	Two weak but directionally consistent signals	**Partially validated**
Grand View Research: 9.5% CAGR, global climbing gym market, 2026-2033	Grand View Research	Single analyst source, different scope than IBISWorld	**Partially validated**
CWA 2026 survey shows broadening age and income vs. 2019	CWA blog summary, cross-referenced with Climbing Magazine's methodology coverage	Two sources agree on direction; no percentages published; smaller 2026 sample flagged	**Partially validated**
Seattle metro has roughly 10-12 commercial climbing gyms	BoulderingList, Seattle Times, IndoorClimbingGym.com, Flashclimb directories	Multiple directory sources converge on a similar range	**Partially validated**
San Francisco proper has at least 4 named climbing gyms	IndoorClimbingGym.com directory	Single directory source, likely incomplete	**Partially validated**

Claim	Independent Sources	Convergence	Label
Boulder app: 3.9/5, 187 ratings; ~4,498 users (2024 estimate)	App Store listing (rating); Climbing Magazine (user estimate)	Rating is a direct platform figure; user count is a single, dated press estimate	**Partially validated**
5 of 5 primary interview participants use only personal networks, no formal tool tried	On Belay primary interviews, Participants 1, 2, 3, 4, 6	Direct, consistent finding across the full interview sample	**Validated (primary research, n=5)**
Trust and familiarity outweigh a stranger's higher skill for most participants	On Belay primary interviews	4 of 5 participants concur; 1 participant diverges	**Validated (primary research, n=5)**
Gender relevance is discipline-conditioned (irrelevant top-rope, can matter in lead)	On Belay primary interviews	Consistent across participants who addressed it; one gives the only discipline-specific answer	**Validated (primary research, n=5)**

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