

The Commerce Graph - Backlink Analysis



FOR BEAUTY BRAND • AI SEARCH

In AI search, your authority is your inventory.

Backlinks are the citations that decide whether Beauty Brand appears in AI answers, product roundups, and high-intent searches.

31.5%

OF SEPHORA'S TOP LINKS ARE EARNED COVERAGE

The independent signal AI engines trust.

87.6%

OF ULTA'S TOP LINKS ARE AFFILIATE / DEAL SITES

A rented, transactional signal.

WHY BEAUTY BRAND SHOULD CARE

- 01 AI citations**
AI overviews cite authoritative sources; earned links are the credential.
- 02 Search visibility**
Beauty buyers search reviews, swatches, and 'best' lists before they buy.
- 03 Brand authority**
Independent editorial links signal prestige more than paid placements.
- 04 Competitive moat**
A strong backlink profile is hard to copy and compounds over time.

THE GAP, IN THREE NUMBERS

Sephora doesn't just have more links. It has more kinds of them.

1.76× More unique referring domains than Ulta 81,655 vs. 46,293 domains — the durable measure of link breadth.	87.6% Of Ulta's top-authority links are affiliate / deal sites Coupon hubs, GWP communities, deal blogs — infrastructure any retailer can rent.	31.5% Of Sephora's top-authority links are earned influencer coverage Independent beauty editors, creators, and blogs — inventory that can't be bought.
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The headline story is scale. The real story, one layer down, is composition — and composition is what AI-search engines increasingly reward when choosing which retailer to cite.

BACKLINK PROFILE AT A GLANCE

Bigger on almost every axis —
except spam.

METRIC	SEPHORA.COM	ULTA.COM	SEPHORA ADVANTAGE
Domain authority rank (0–100)	72	69	+3 pts
Live backlinks	2,130,102	1,302,087	1.64×
Live referring domains	81,655	46,293	1.76×
Referring main domains	77,728	43,005	1.81×
Referring IP addresses	26,683	17,304	1.54×
Referring subnets	11,959	7,775	1.54×
Backlink spam score (live)	19	12	Ultra cleaner

FIGURE 1 — SCALE ADVANTAGE

Sephora is woven into 1.76× as many independent corners of the web.

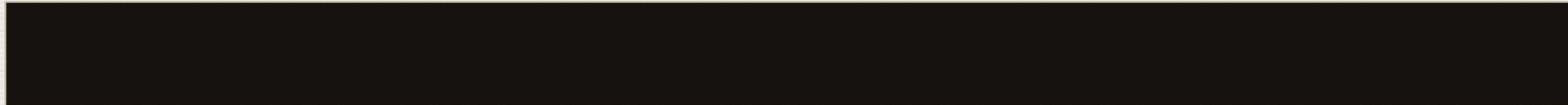
Referring-domain count is the more durable authority signal — far harder to manufacture at scale than raw backlink volume.

Live backlinks

MILLIONS

SEPHORA.COM

2.13M



ULTA.COM

1.30M



SEPHORA ADVANTAGE

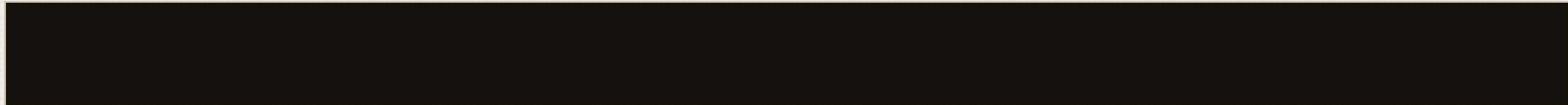
1.64×

Unique referring domains

THOUSANDS

SEPHORA.COM

81,655



ULTA.COM

46,293



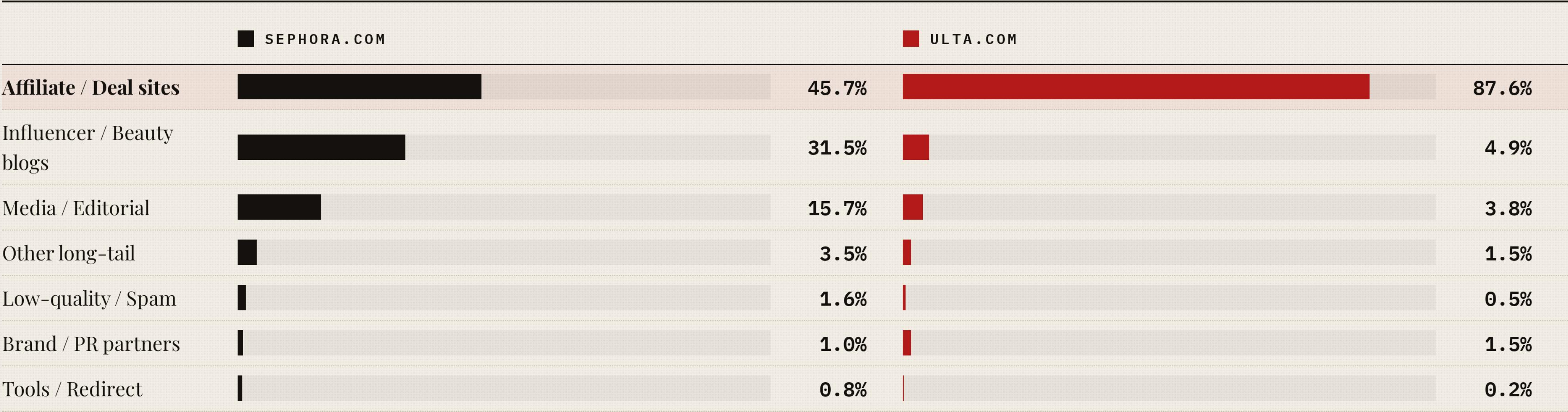
SEPHORA ADVANTAGE

1.76×

WHERE THE HIGHEST-AUTHORITY LINKS COME FROM

Ulta’s authority is concentrated.
Sephora’s is *distributed*.

Share of backlink weight within each site’s top-100 referring domains, manually classified into seven source types.



CASE STUDY — ULTA’S RENTED AUTHORITY

Almost **nine of every ten** of Ulta’s best links flow through channels any competitor can plug into.

87.6%
of Ulta’s top-100 highest-authority backlink weight sits in affiliate & deal-aggregator sites.

SEPHORA, SAME MEASURE: 45.7%

THE DEPENDENCY, NAMED

- × icangwp.com
- × gwpaddicts.com
- × usgwp.com
- × freestufffinder.com
- × Bustle affiliate placements
- × TheZoeReport affiliate placements

THE SMOKING GUN
5% of Ulta’s top-100 highest-authority backlinks carry affiliate-tracking parameters (AID/PID/CID, Rakuten tags). Sephora: **0%**.

FIGURE 3 — WHERE EARNED COVERAGE LIVES

Sephora isn't just earning more coverage — it's earning it from stronger sites.

AVERAGE DOMAIN RANK • TOP-100 REFERRERS

Influencer / Blog

SEPHORA		40.7
ULTA		33.5

Media / Editorial

SEPHORA		40.8
ULTA		34.3

Affiliate / Deal

SEPHORA		42.7
ULTA		41.3

SEPHORA'S EARNED BENCH

HudaBeauty.com	EARNED
NewBeauty.com	EARNED
BuzzFeed.com	EARNED
PopSugar.com	EARNED
Glossy.co	EARNED

Editorial links compound. Affiliate links **rent**.

FIGURE 4 — ANCHOR TEXT DIVERSITY

The anchors look identical.

The difference is upstream.

One representative backlink per unique anchor string, sampled from each site’s top-100 backlinks by referring-domain authority. Both look organic — 94% unique anchors, 77-78% long-tail descriptive.

ANCHOR TYPE	SEPHORA	ULTA
Exact-match branded	5%	8%
Generic CTA ("shop now")	10%	11%
Long-tail / descriptive	78%	77%
Image / no anchor text	7%	4%

THE UPSTREAM GAP

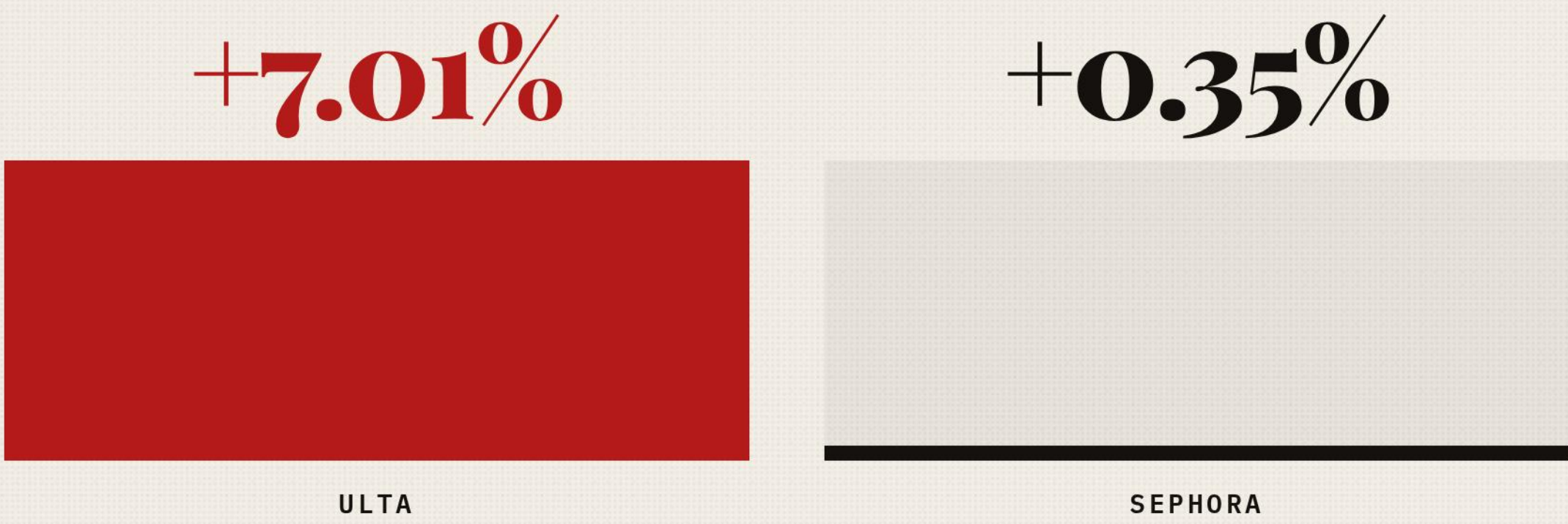
5pts

Ulta’s top-100 backlinks carry affiliate-tracking parameters 5% of the time. Sephora’s carry them **never**.

TWO DIFFERENT GAMES

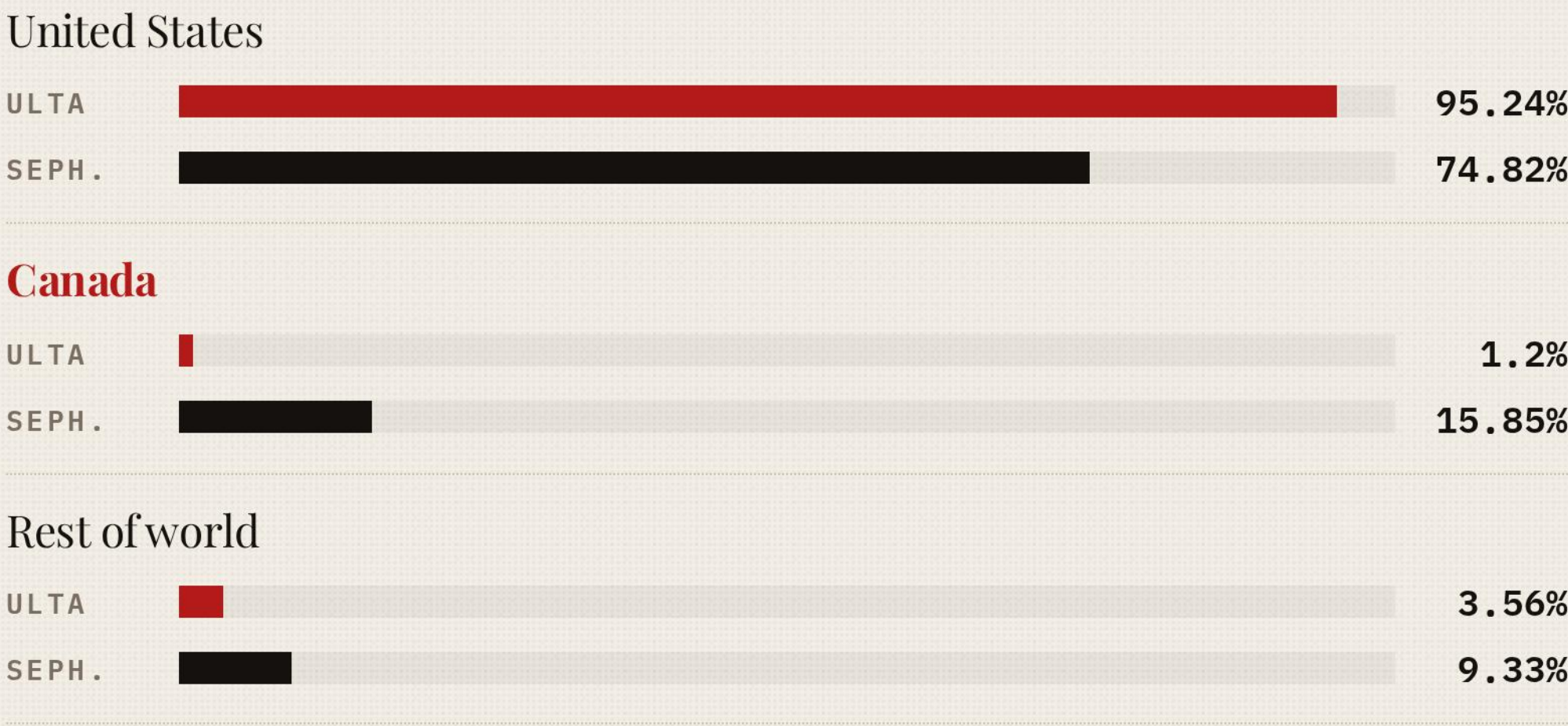
Ulta is **moving faster** inside a smaller, more *domestic* universe.

RECENT BACKLINK GROWTH



Ulta is adding backlinks roughly **20× faster** — but from a smaller base and, notably, with referring-domain count actually declining (−0.89%). Volume without breadth.

TRAFFIC GEOGRAPHY (JUNE 2026)



Sephora’s backlink graph is reinforced by a genuinely international brand footprint. Ulta’s is a U.S. story.

TRAFFIC CONTEXT • JUNE 2026

Two link ecosystems produce two customer intents.

SEPHORA.COM

34.59M15.94M

TOTAL VISITSORGANIC SEARCH

TOP KEYWORD THEMES

- sephora gift card
- sephora birthday gift
- loyalty & gifting

Editorial, membership, brand-launch and gifting coverage — the ecosystem that surfaces in AI-cited discovery pathways.

ULTA.COM

29.79M12.61M

TOTAL VISITSORGANIC SEARCH

TOP KEYWORD THEMES

- ulta coupon
- ulta coupons
- promo & basket-building

Deal and coupon amplification — high retail-intent capture, but a link ecosystem competitors join by signing up for the same networks.

Sephora appears to own more of the beauty conversation. Ulta appears to monetize more of the beauty shopping mission inside the U.S. — a difference that shows up first in backlinks and only later in revenue.

THE SEPHORA MOAT, SYNTHESIZED

Four structural properties. *One defensible advantage.*

None can be bought quickly. Together, they are what AI-search systems appear to reward when deciding which retailer to cite.

01 Scale that compounds

81,655 vs. 46,293 referring domains — Sephora's brand is woven into 1.76× as many independent corners of the web, each a potential citation source.

02 Channel diversification

Top-authority weight spread across affiliate (45.7%), influencer (31.5%), media (15.7%). Ulta's is 87.6% one channel. Diversified equity is harder to erode.

03 Higher-authority earned coverage

Sephora's influencer and media referrers average DR 40.7–40.8; Ulta's average 33.5–34.3. Stronger sites, more likely to be treated as credible AI sources.

04 Cleaner top-tier links

0% of Sephora's top-100 highest-authority backlinks carry affiliate-tracking parameters. 5% of Ulta's do — the clearest signal of rented vs. earned authority.

A SIX-MOVE PLAYBOOK FOR BEAUTY BRAND MARKETERS

Don't chase Ulta's model. Build Sephora's.

Chasing affiliate volume optimizes for a channel every competitor can access equally. Building diversified, higher-authority link equity is structurally difficult to replicate — and precisely the signal AI-search rewards.

01 Track referring-domain count, not backlinks Volume is cheap; unique domains and subnets aren't. Set a quarterly target vs. named competitors.	02 Cap affiliate concentration No single source-type category above 60% of top-tier link weight. Route PR & seeding budget to close the gap.	03 Prioritize higher-DR editorial One feature on a DR-40+ outlet beats many DR-20 deal-blog mentions. Weight lists toward under-represented publishers.
04 Convert affiliate links to earned Flag AID/PID/CID and Skimlinks/Sovrn patterns. Pursue contributed articles, seeding & expert commentary with those publishers.	05 Publish AI-citable first-party content Original data, ingredient explainers, comparison content — so AI engines cite you directly, not a deal aggregator.	06 Monitor deal-site churn as leakage signal Sudden drops in affiliate-referred backlinks warn that a competitor is winning the same placements — and the same AI citations.