

# ***ham\$ta***

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***hamsta.us***

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**ham\$ta** is a transformative web experience that reframes popular YouTube content among 11- to 25-year-olds with the goal of provoking questions and a shift in perspective on this platform in particular and on current trends in media economy and consumption in general.

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When I was a teenager the big thing were casting shows on television. And they have been big for a long time. But like so many other things and aspects in our lives this is changing because of social media. Now, the number one goal for teenagers is to become a famous on online platforms like tumblr, instagram or YouTube. With a background in media studies I am very fascinated by things we humans consume in general. I became especially interested in YouTube videos that get millions of views, thousands of comments with content that seems almost absurd to some people, meaning people that are 25 and older.



Zoella, Smosh, Tyler Oakley and Michelle Phan

Because these YouTubers attract millions of viewers (mostly teenagers, see next image), they are stars; just by talking about their favorite and recommended products. And they are treated like stars, YouTube makes a big campaign promoting them on subways, buildings, billboards, even on TV and obviously stating the number of *fans* they have. A fan, that is someone, who opted in to get notifications whenever Zoella and co. have uploaded a new video. They have fan meetings, fan mail (Tyler Oakley frequently films himself opening his mail and millions watch him do just that), books, merchandise just like real stars. And just

like *real* real stars, Zoella (Zoe Sugg)<sup>1</sup> and her boyfriend Alfie Deyes<sup>2</sup> will become wax figures at Madame Tussauds in London later this year<sup>3</sup>.



Zoella at a fan meeting, because that is what stars do.

Watching the videos of these stars, and it's very easy to discover them all, once you discover one, YouTube helps you to find all the similar ones, I realized what great economic power these young people have on the generation that comes after them. With a huge reach comes huge responsibility. With a huge audience comes also a higher interest from the advertising industry. YouTube has become more and more like TV in regards to advertising with obvious commercials and banners, but also a lot of camouflaged advertising.

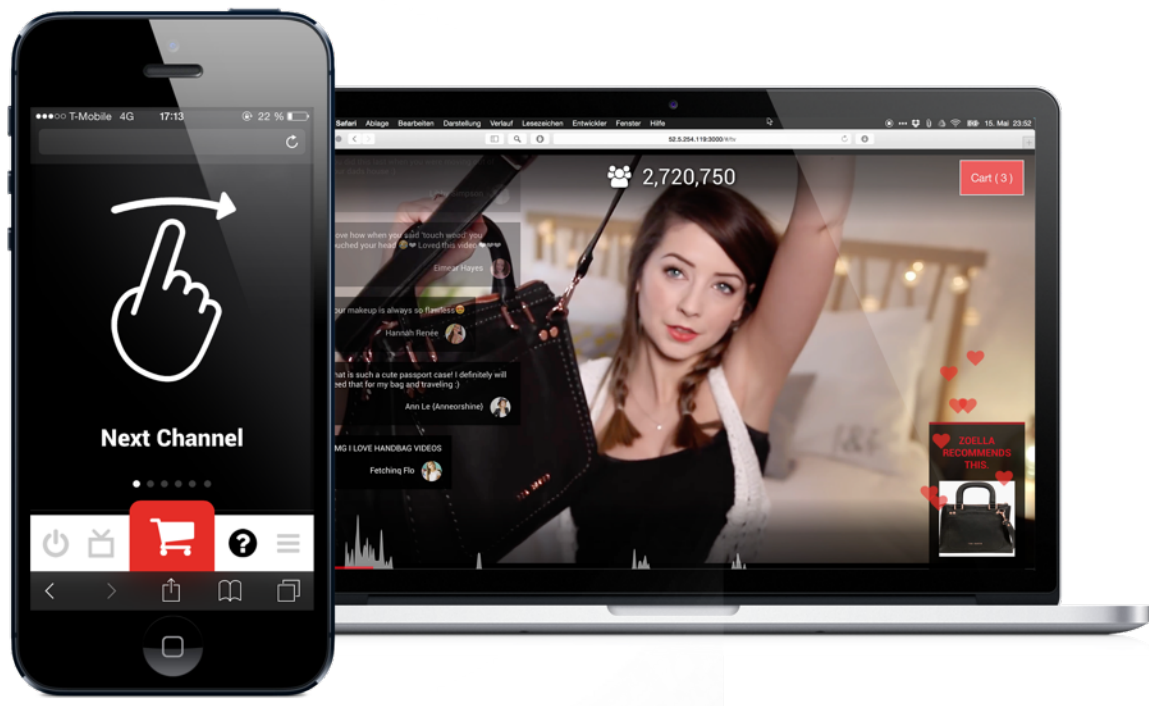
**ham\$ta** was created to address this trend in particular. With **ham\$ta** you watch you favorite YouTubers talk about their favorite things while you can sit back and use your phone as the remote control. You can heart (like) your favorite moments by tapping on your phone, but most importantly you can just relax and let the service add those things you see on the screen to your cart. Then, very conveniently, buy everything at once on amazon.

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<sup>1</sup> 8,168,045 subscribers on YouTube (May 18, 2015)

<sup>2</sup> 4,131,764 subscribers on YouTube under his alias PointlessBlog (May 18, 2015)

<sup>3</sup> [www.bbc.co.uk/newsbeat/article/32309109/zoella-and-alfie-deyes-getting-waxworks-at-madame-tussauds](http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsbeat/article/32309109/zoella-and-alfie-deyes-getting-waxworks-at-madame-tussauds)



The setup, your computer and your smartphone. They act as TV and remote control.

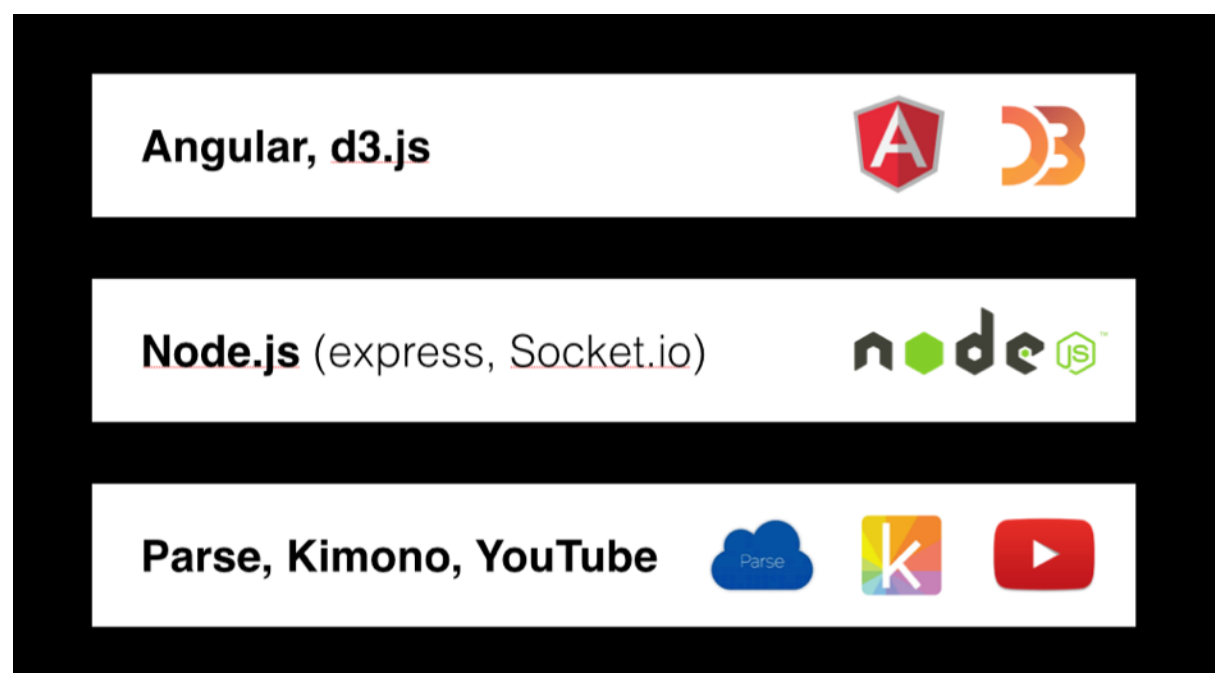
The manipulation and power of these (for now only) subjectively selected YouTube stars on, again, millions of mostly teenagers is shown by this simple mechanism of the auto-adding-to-your-cart. It is a subtle critique, but that is only fitting, since this process of influence and camouflaged advertising is also very subtle in real life. The result in the end is the same, just by watching these videos the viewers buy this “stuff”.

The hearts are an homage to Periscope, one of the big live-broadcasting applications that recently rose in popularity. Periscope, Meerkat and YouNow (especially populated by teens) are just new, different platforms, on which people, including those young ones, can chase fame and likes<sup>4</sup>. And since social media is so much about numbers or the representation of those, a graph was added to visualize the hearts count over the course of the video. You can then determine which moments in time are most popular and you want to see them and wait for them. This graph is representative for the trend of going with the trends, or rather for the fact that we only consume things (videos, photos, articles, posts, even people) that are liked by others, thus, those things that are already popular get even more popular. When I started researching on YouTube stars in March, Zoella had not even cracked the 8 million followers mark (7.7 million); in about two months she has gained almost half a million new *fans*.

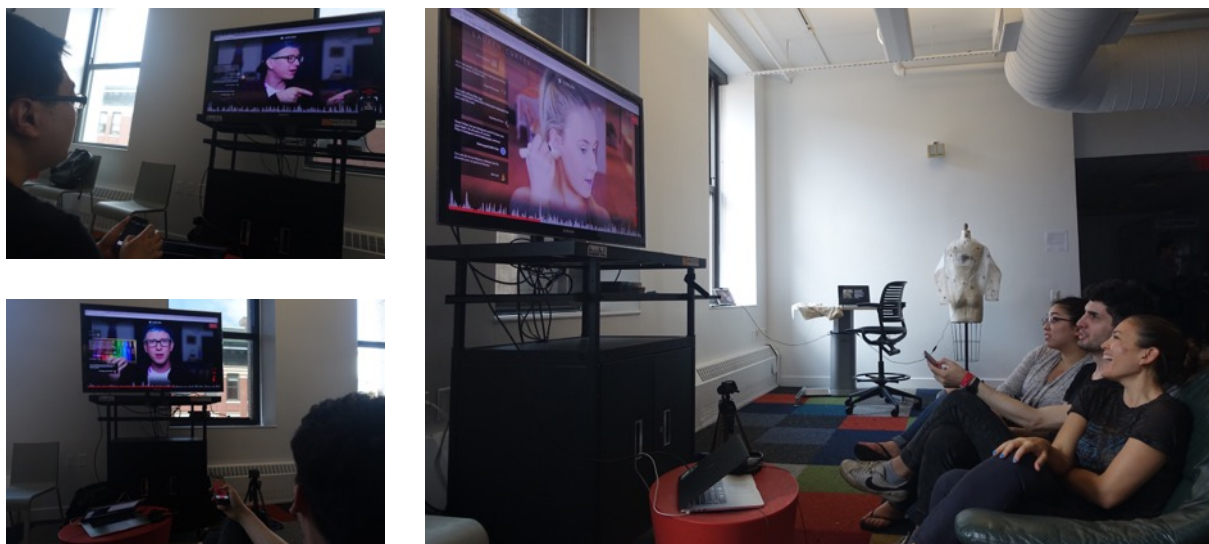
<sup>4</sup> Reference for teenagers and likes - Generation Like on Frontline (PBS) by Douglas Rushkoff (2014)



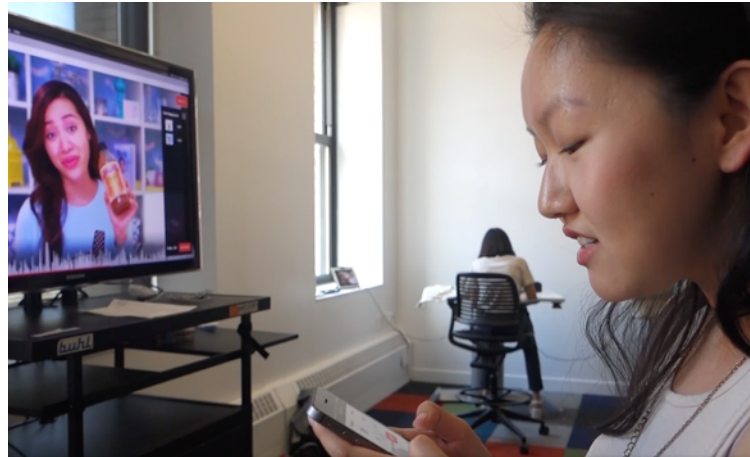
The process of creating **ham\$ta** was an iterative one. Through user testing I observed what people expect from the setup, interface and wording/icons. Some of them felt uncomfortable about the auto-adding-to-your-cart, some were relaxed about that fact, knowing nothing will happen until proper payment information has been provided. The first version was built only with client-side JavaScript and only the computer screen, later the remote was added through the technology of server-side JavaScript and socket.io. In the end swiping for changing channels and tapping for giving hearts and creating instant gratification were implemented.



MEAN stack, client, server, database (from top to bottom)



Test users said the the interface looked “slick” and “real” and the experience was “smooth” and “easy”, but also that it was “an endless loop of consumerism and entertainment”.



One tester said: *“On one side I see that it’s consumerism and that really sucks, especially since YouTube is getting monetized. But at the same time I do buy stuff from YouTube, so this makes it really convenient for me to just shop and I don’t have to click a bunch of links. I don’t know how I feel about that, because it’s convenient. I like it. It makes me want to but things.”*

Mostly the reactions have been “this is the future of online-shopping”. I don’t see this necessarily as a compliment to my idea, rather this is how most of us feel about where our habits of consumption will lead us. There already are services that help you buy products you see in videos ([smartzet.com](http://smartzet.com)) or applications that let you use your phone as a remote control ([xbox.com/smartglass](http://xbox.com/smartglass)); and I did not know of either when I was designing **ham\$ta**.

**ham\$ta** could very well be an existing product. It was the intention to make it as real as possible. However, as mentioned before, this results in a very subtle critique. The take away of this experience should not only be “Wow, this is how online-shopping will be like, soon”, but also “Do I really want this and should YouTube really become the next shopping platform where everything is about consumerism and buying things”. I discovered another project/product that had similar approach and goals; pplkpr<sup>5</sup>. The application analyzes your relationships with the data it collects from a heart rate tracker, telling you who is good and bad for you. To some this might be something they could not imagine is real, as it seems to be a critique on how data is used to analyze anything, even relationships and emotions. Others might have been waiting for this product to finally have a way for managing the people in their lives.

Similar to pplkpr, reactions to **ham\$ta** can vary. One can think, this is the solution to a real problem YouTube viewers face when watching and buying things that are mentioned in the videos. One could also see it as infomercials. And there are other interpretations. To make

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<sup>5</sup> [pplkpr.com](http://pplkpr.com), by Lauren McCarthy and Kyle McDonald

the critique less subtle users should not only experience **ham\$ta**, they should also watch the teaser video<sup>6</sup>. In the end this whole project is really simply an irony test; not everyone will understand my intentions and my message. Like in the example of pplkpr, however, the teaser will make passing this test a lot easier. And hopefully this text helps, as well.

To try the experience go to [\*\*hamsta.us\*\*](http://hamsta.us)

Further documentation about my creation process including the thinking behind the name **ham\$ta** can be found on [dt.hangdothiduc.de/tagged/hamsta](http://dt.hangdothiduc.de/tagged/hamsta).

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<sup>6</sup> <http://vimeo.com/228miles/hamsta>