ERIF Sinterklaas Brand & Product Study 2021

Widespread protest and superficial transformation
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Cover Art: photo by Kay Fahner of Mitchell Lisse and Madeline Swainhart at the Black Lives Matter protest on 3rd June 2020 in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. © Fahner/Swainhart

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We hope this sixth report will continue to shine a light on your achievements as well as on the state of white supremacy in the Netherlands.
Introduction: the sixth report

At the time ERIF published its fifth report on the branding and advertising of specific Sinterklaas products in 2020 (ERIF, 2020), the world was engulfed in an intensification of the ongoing Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests. This campaign mobilised concerned participants globally to speak up and act out in opposition to state-sanctioned violence against Black people. Despite the unfolding Covid-19 pandemic that restricted movements and gatherings, numerous large-scale protests were also organised across the Netherlands, often by and among anti-Zwarte Piet activists (Holligan, 2020). The previous report detailed how since the Sinterklaas festival is an expression of belonging and Dutchness, the negative depictions of people of African descent inherent in the caricature of Zwarte Piet ensured Black people’s exclusion from the celebrations. Further, the racist depictions of Zwarte Piet, coupled with the racist responses to removing the character from the festival, demonstrate to us the extent to which anti-blackness continues to operate within the Netherlands more generally, and we therefore argued that a broader form of societal change would need to occur to really address these issues.

These factors can clearly be identified by observing the movements by specific brands and stores and how they portray the Sinterklaas festival, as these trends continue year-on-year into our sixth report. Sinterklaas-specific products assessed as grade 1 (no reference to the Piet character at all) during our online fieldwork have increased significantly since last year’s report, while the most offensive products (grades 7 and 8) continue to shrink. We explore the full results of the 2020 online data collection in more detail in the Results chapter.

Despite a year-on-year decline in grades 7 and 8 products, they still remained on the market, and anti-racist organisations and campaigners took note of that in 2020. Although the Covid-19 pandemic could not prevent anti-racist street-level demonstrations - both in terms of anti-racism protests and more specifically targeted anti-Zwarte Piet protests - it did manage to halt local and national Sinterklaas intochten parades in 2020. Although an official arrival of Sinterklaas was filmed and broadcast on Dutch television, the location of filming was kept secret in order to avoid crowds (Dutch News, 2020a). The ongoing health crisis and resulting restrictions on movement also meant that it was difficult for our fieldwork teams to collect in-store data as we have done in previous years, as discussed in more depth in the methodology chapter. However, the online fieldwork was able to go ahead and present branding and advertising results that are consistent with what we have seen in previous years.

Recent developments in the Netherlands

Even before the Dutch Tweede Kamer welcomed its first black, woman party leader - Sylvana Simons of Bij1 - the Netherlands was very slowly coming to terms with its colonial legacy and the impact that has on present-day communities. For example, towards the end of 2019 Den Haag announced plans to erect a monument to commemorate the enslavement of people of African and Indian descent in Suriname by the Dutch (Donker, 2020). Also, in the wake of the 2020 BLM protests, certain Dutch universities took a more explicit stand against racial inequalities and pledged to work harder to fight for more inclusion, such as at the University of Maastricht (2020). Nonetheless, leading cultural and educational institutions still have much work to do in order to proactively promote and/or explain Dutch heritage and society in an honest and inclusive manner (Gario, 2020). Within a more global context, the pervasiveness of anti-racist discussions meant that leading media platforms such as Netflix and Disney would go on to either remove or provide a trigger warning to accompany the racist imagery on their streaming services (NOS Nieuws, 2020a).
In specific relation to this report, public support for Zwarte Piet dropped significantly following the widespread BLM protests according to I&O Research (NOS Nieuws, 2020b), eventually causing Prime Minister Rutte to come off of the proverbial fence to finally concede that the caricature is in fact racist (NL Times, 2020a). Nonetheless, this was arguably in response to international pressure from the likes of Jesse Jackson (Het Parool, 2020), as well as numerous large web stores (Amazon, Bol.com), digital companies (Google) and social media sites (Instagram, Facebook), who banned Zwarte Piet-related products and ads from their platforms in the latter part of 2020 (Dixon, 2020; NOS Nieuws, 2020c; NOS Nieuws, 2020d; Otto, 2020; NU.nl, 2020; Quekel, 2020). Certain cities - such as Arnhem and Nijmegen - and formerly Dutch Caribbean islands - such as Aruba - made the decision to further remove Zwarte Piet from their parades (Lalor, 2020; NL Times, 2020b). Den Haag - a city that has been notorious in its continued institutional support of Zwarte Piet in previous years (El Maslouhi, 2020) - announced it would remove municipal funding for parades featuring the anti-black character following the Black Lives Matter protests (Omroep West, 2020). Other forms of (Dutch) racialised imagery were questioned within this more critical discourse, such as the “zwarte gapers” on certain pharmacies (NOS Nieuws, 2020e).

**Pushback**

Nevertheless, there remained some notable support for the blackfaced version of Piet, as an online Zwarte Pietenjournaal was launched in order to maintain the “real” Piet in response to the numerous announcements that municipalities and brands would only feature sooty Piets in the future (NOS Nieuws, 2020f). Meanwhile, Eindhoven introduced “Grijze Piet” (Grey Piet) as their solution, which anti-blackface organisation Kick Out Zwarte Piet (KOZP) were forced to condemn as “blackface lite” (Andrews, 2020). Despite the ongoing Covid19 pandemic, by late-2020 anti-Zwarte Piet protests were planned and peacefully executed - especially in the south of the Netherlands - even in the face of extreme violence from racist, so-called counter-protesters who clashed often with police (NU.nl and ANP, 2020). A KOZP demonstration planned for Eindhoven had to be cancelled due to the threat of violence from Pegida (NL Times, 2020c), while pro-Piet extremists threw fireworks at KOZP campaigners at a rally in Maastricht (NL Times 2020d).

The pushback against social progress via the eradication of a racist figure such as Zwarte Piet indicates that certain sections of (white) Dutch society are not ready to live equally among non-white citizens and residents. Their exclusionary and entitled behaviour poisons all aspects of life for Black and other minoritised groups and individuals, as highlighted by the Zwart Manifest (Black Manifesto), published during this year’s election season (Beweging Zwart Manifest, 2021). Hence the need and support for political representation by campaigners such as Simons (NOS Nieuws, 2021), who are unafraid to place the politically charged debate of Zwarte Piet exactly where it needs to be: within the broader discussion of contemporary Dutch racism.

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1 It is worth noting that although Amazon pledged to rid its online marketplace of Zwarte Piet-related products in the wake of the BLM demonstrations in the Netherlands (Quekel, 2020), it is still possible to rent and/or purchase Sinterklaas films that feature Piet in full blackface as of 2021, as we show in our Results chapter.
**Methodology**

The methodological approach for this longitudinal project consists of both online categorisation and analysis, and in-store observations techniques, conducted between October and December 2020. While most of the results presented below are based on analyses of products and advertisements from the specific stores this project usually follows year-on-year, some results also come from more general “neighbourhood” observations. Currently our study routinely assesses the products and advertisements from the following stores: Albert Heijn, Jumbo, Plus, HEMA, Blokker, Jamin, Ekoplaza, Intertoys, Kruidvat, Etos, Xenos and Bol.com (online only). The online phase of the research takes place over three sessions, where the team collects Sinterklaas specific products to review via the given store’s website. This part of the research is completed by an internal ERIF study team. For Bol.com analyses, unlike with other stores (such as Albert Heijn or Blokker, where all Sinterklaas items available are reviewed), only the first 15 items that come up on a “Sinterklaas” search, per category, are reviewed for the study. The categories used for the Bol.com selection are: music, DVDs, books, toys, puzzles and games, decorations, costumes and babies and toddlers.

In-store fieldwork takes place more continuously over two months (rather than in just three sessions) and includes a broader observation team, active throughout the Netherlands. In addition to reviewing Sinterklaas-specific products\(^2\), the observation team also pays attention to how a store is decorated and how promotional displays are used within the building to showcase seasonal products (both third-party and/or home-brand). Based on what is viewed in-store, a comparison with what has been found via the shop’s website can be made. At times, the sale of certain products is the result of a specific franchise using up old stock, or store decorations can also be based on the cultural views of shop managers. In-store fieldwork also allows us to witness Sinterklaas-specific products and window displays for smaller, non-franchised local stores, such as bakeries, to give an insight into racist imagery being used outside of the chain stores we focus this research on.

The in-store fieldwork team usually captures anything that is easily viewable without disturbing other shoppers and/or staff, as well as refraining from drawing too much attention, which may cause harm or expressions of hostility towards the fieldworker. However, this years’ fieldwork was seriously hampered by the outbreak of Covid-19. Safety concerns, lockdowns and closed stores meant fieldwork could not be done as extensively this year as shown in previous reports. This means that in-store observations are a significantly smaller part of the research this year. Travel restrictions have also affected the geographic diversity we aim for in this study; thus, there are more observations in the Randstad and fewer, unfortunately, in the rest of the Netherlands (see figure 1).

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\(^2\) By “Sinterklaas specific” it is meant: products only usually sold, purchased and consumed during the Sinterklaas period (October - December) in the Netherlands, e.g. chocolate letters, kruidnoten and various forms of decorations.
Analysis

ERIF currently uses 11 grades (see the table below) to categorise the various products and displays collected by the research team during online research as well as the imagery captured in store. The grades range from grade 1 (no visible references to the Piet character) to grade 8 (usage of imagery featuring a real, white person in blackface). The grades between 1 and 8 show a general movement towards more problematic versions of the Piet character, culminating in the use of racial stereotypes and blackface, although this is not to say the grades at the top of the table are entirely unproblematic.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Code</th>
<th>Grade Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>No Piet character visible on Sinterklaas specific product packaging or advertising.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Silhouette/shadow of a Piet-like figure on Sinterklaas specific product packaging or advertising.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3 Images to illustrate the grades are offered in the next chapter as examples of how the grades are applied during in-store fieldwork. The same application is used for online products.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2a</td>
<td>Piets presented as (cartoon) animals on Sinterklaas specific product packaging or advertising.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>White Piet (either real person or cartoon) with no face-paint of any kind on Sinterklaas specific product packaging or advertising.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Multiple Piets portrayed by or as having (cartoon or real) any ethnicity (incl. white!), with no face paint of any kind, on Sinterklaas specific product packaging or advertising.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4a</td>
<td>Women (and/or female children), or man (or male child) of colour dressed up as Sint (real or cartoon). Can be accompanied by Piets portrayed by/as having any ethnicity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>White Piets (real or cartoon) with &quot;sooty&quot; faces on Sinterklaas specific product packaging or advertising.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5a</td>
<td>Non-white Piets (real or cartoon) with &quot;sooty&quot; faces on Sinterklaas specific product packaging or advertising.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Multi-coloured (with the use of face-paint) Piets (real or cartoon) on Sinterklaas specific product packaging or advertising.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Real or cartoon Piets portrayed as having African features or by black people, with a traditional Piet costume, with no white Piets presented. Only when analysing cartoons, includes caricature references.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Real people only (ie. in photographs) wearing blackface to portray Zwarte Piet, with exaggerated/stereotypical, racist features on Sinterklaas specific product packaging or advertising.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The analysis and write-up phase of the research (January to April 2021) took some time due to the complex and comparative nature of the project, but also due to the triggering nature of the reviewed content. The entire team takes time following the Sinterklaas period in order to recover from living through the season, and intentionally following the racist discourses that erupt in the Netherlands around this topic each year, before coming back to the data and drafting the report. Needless to say, the novel coronavirus is an additional contributing factor this year.
NB: ERIF would like to issue a trigger warning for the remaining chapters of this report, with regards to their imagery, which some readers may find distressing.
Results of the 2020 online and in-store fieldwork

Introduction

The trend noted in our previous report towards more promotion of Halloween and Christmas-related products seems to continue this year (ERIF, 2020: 33). In-store observations show a lot of attention for these two holidays compared to Sinterklaas. For example, in a COOP supermarket in Rotterdam a small Halloween-themed display appeared at the same time as a Sinterklaas-display and was of equal size. The supermarket also did not use Sinterklaas-themed decorations, whereas it had in previous years. In a XENOS in Den Haag, the Sinterklaas display was smaller than previous years (figure 2), while the Halloween items took up an entire aisle.

Figure 2

Interestingly, when looking at the number of products noted in our online research, a trend emerges toward fewer researched products in recent years: 345 this year, compared to 467 in 2019 and 579 in 2018. Ekoplaza, Jamin, Etos and Intertoys especially showed fewer products this year, with each store presenting less than 10. Blokker (as we illustrate further below) has also shown a dramatic decrease in Sinterklaas-related products: from 191 in 2018 to 121 in 2019 and 45 this year. Finally, while researching Bol.com we could not find 15 products for certain categories (toys, games and puzzles). Keeping in mind that the number of stores researched in these years only changed very slightly\(^4\), the question whether this is another sign of Sinterklaas products being out-competed by other products is, for now, theoretical. Since we do our online research by entering the term ‘Sinterklaas’ in the search bar, it could also mean these products are not being tagged by the store with that term, as a way of not prioritising or pushing Sinterklaas products.

At the moment, then, we can only speculate on the increased presence of Halloween and Christmas items being marketed at children and young families during what we previously considered to be the Sinterklaas period. Therefore, in order to clearly establish if those festivals pose any kind of risk towards Sinterklaas - both in terms of commercial performance and cultural relevance - more intentional research is required in the coming years.

\(^4\) We removed Bart Smit and Marqt from the research in 2019, but both stores together only accounted for a total of 10 products in the 2018 research.
Still, Sinterklaas has definitely not left the country yet and many stores do not let the festival go by completely unnoticed. In this sense, it was also interesting this year how different stores used children of colour to portray Sinterklaas in their seasonal banners online, while the packaging of their actual products hardly reflects that (grade 4a accounts for barely 1% of all products this year). See figures 3 and 4.

**Figure 3**

![Figure 3](image)

**Figure 4**

![Figure 4](image)
Changes between 2019 and 2020

In 2020, there were no changes in the stores used for the online research part from 2019. The ERIF team graded a total of 345 products, of which 235 came from the websites of the various chain stores, and 110 further products were graded on Bol.com.

Most noticeable in the results is the significantly increased share of grade 1 (no Piet visible on product or packaging) this year. See graph 1. After a slight dip in 2019, its share of the grade total stands again at more than half: with 57.5% it is higher than ever. On the other side of our grade spectrum, this increase is mirrored by the significant decrease in the shares of grades 7 (Piets with 'African' features) and 8 (White people in blackface): respectively from 14.9% in 2019 to 11.6% now, and from 4.1% to 2%. Both of these grades now have the smallest share ever seen by our research. Overall, the changes this year represent the most notable shift in shares of these grades since the first dramatic shift of our 2017 report.

Graph 1

Interestingly, we can see that the increasing movement of grade 1 over the years has been less straightforward to explain than the more continual decreasing movement of grades 7 and 8 combined. 7 and 8’s shared declines might be explained as a consequence of the increase of other, different forms of Zwarte Piet, most noticeably grade 5 (sooty piets), which saw a clear rise in recent years. This year grade 5 (sooty Piets) is stable at 9.5%, while grade 5a (non-white Piets with sooty faces) sees a decrease from 3.7% to 2.3%. Overall, however, the grades representing the ‘new’ interpretations of the Piet character (grades 2-6) have a somewhat smaller share in the total compared to last year especially (28.9%, down from 36.1%). They seem to have been pushed out by grade 1. Note the relatively big drop in the
shares of grades 4 (multiple Piets of any ethnicity, without face paint) and 6 (multi-coloured Piets): from 3.5% to 0.9% and from 3.7% to 1.7%, respectively.

Graph 2

Only Blokker and Bol.com sold grade 8 products online this year, like in 2019. See graph 2. On the other hand, there is only one store with a ‘perfect’ score of 100% grade 1, which is Ekoplaza - like last year. Other stores that came close to this score are Plus and Jamin. While Jamin had a 100% grade 1 score last year, Plus has increased its share of grade 1 very significantly compared to last year.

Speculaas and taaitaai

The reason both Plus and Jamin failed to get 100% grade 1 however lies in the fact they both sell so-called ‘speculaaspoppen’ (spice cookie ‘dolls’) and/or ‘taaitaai’ (sweet, chewy, aniseed-flavoured cookies) online. These are assessed as grade 7, because they are actually shaped like the figure of Zwarte Piet with ‘African’ features. Speculaas is a traditional sweet that is sold in the Netherlands year-round (unlike taaitaai, which is sold during Sinterklaas only), but are especially associated with the Sinterklaas festivities and around that time and are shaped like Zwarte Piet (Holton, 2010). Moreover, the spices used to make both taaitaai and speculaas have a clear origin in Dutch colonialism (Peter, 2011). While mostly not recognized as Piet-figures anymore, these cookies are still shaped like them and we do assess them as such in our research. Thus, in a lot of the supermarkets covered in our report, taaitaai and speculaas products now seem to account for most of the grade 7 share. See figure 5 for an example of a ‘Speculaas-pop’ (‘Speculaas-figure’) from Jamin.
**Stores**

**Albert Heijn**

The largest chain in the Netherlands is the first example of the increase in share of grade 1 products: From two thirds in 2019 to almost 80% in 2020. The rest of the products are either grades 2 or 7. Like other stores, grade 7 comprised mostly of taaitaai (a small increase from the 7.7% of 2019). Albert Heijn offered an example of the aforementioned Piet-shaped taaitaai. In this case, it's in the shape of Piet's face (figure 6).

**Figure 6**

No other grades were assigned to Albert Heijn products online this year, and the few in-store observations did not show any other products that were not available online, nor any higher than grade 2 displays.
Graph 3

Of the three big supermarket chains in our research, Jumbo - as usual - presents the most variety in Piet-figures on their products, though the number of grades seen online is down to 6 from 8 last year. The increase in the share of grade 1 products is remarkable, however: from 27.3% to 68%. Grade 6, so popular at Jumbo in recent years, continues to decline. In 2018, it made up more than 40% while in 2020 a mere 7.5% of the share remains. Strangely, no grade 5 products were seen online at all this year. Taaitaal is again responsible for the entire share of grade 7. While the confusion of Jumbo’s house brand packaging then seems to be somewhat less heightened in favour of grade 1 packaging, it still remains: our team graded Jumbo house brand products with grades 1, 3, 4, 6 and 7. It shows in the packaging of its chocolate letters for instance, with one kind of packaging with multi-coloured Piets, and another without any human figures at all.

Graph 4
In the store, Jumbo also continues its tradition of selling Sinterklaas products that are not available online. At least one Jumbo in Den Haag sold grade 7 chocolate Piet figures (see figure 7).

Figure 7

![Image of chocolate Piet figures]

**Plus**

Plus, like Albert Heijn and Jumbo, has also expanded its Piet-free products notably. Grade 1 products went from 58.8% to an impressive 92%, thereby removing Piet almost entirely from its online presence. However, the rest of the products are grade 7, made up - as last year - entirely by Bolletje taaitaai. There were no in-store observations to back these up, unfortunately.

**Graph 5**

![Graph showing Plus 2020]

**Blokker**

Blokker is one of the more diverse stores grade-wise, though compared to last year slightly less so (like Jumbo): instead of presenting the full range of eleven grades, it now presents ‘only’ seven. This number still makes it the most diverse store apart from of Bol.com.
Strangely, Blokker seems to go against the trends. The grade 1 share does not increase (as it does both in other stores this year, and has done the last few years for Blokker itself), but is roughly stable, even slightly decreasing (54.5% to 53.4%). Moreover, the shares of both grades 7 and 8 increase (resp. 16.2 to 22.2 and 1.5 to 4.4). Grade 8 consists entirely of books (figure 8), while grade 7 is made up of toys and wrapping paper (figures 9 and 10).

**Figure 8**
The variety in grades can be accounted for, as in previous years, by the large number of third party products and by the variety in products (like books, toys and costumes) Blokker sells. Combined with an increasingly strong online presence Blokker is in this sense better comparable to Bol.com than any other store in our research. Unlike Bol.com, however, Blokker has no known policy of keeping racist imagery out of its stores - either online or physical. These developments combined could possibly account for the stagnation in grade 1 and increase in grades 7 and 8, but we can only speculate this. Nevertheless, it is striking and it makes Blokker the only store in our study this year that shows this reversal in trends. In-store observations tell us that a Blokker store in Den Haag offered a range of Sinterklaas products in 2020 that they do not yet seem to sell online, with images of sooty white piets (grade 5). See figures 11 and 12.

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5 As noted in an interview with Michiel Witteveen by Herman Stil for Het Parool in 2020.
**HEMA**

HEMA sees a slight increase in the share of grade 1 (47.1% to 50%). Also, as last year, the big share of HEMA products with the sooty piets on the packaging is very noticeable, especially the large share of grade 5a (non-white Piets (real or cartoon) with "sooty" faces). The total of both 'sooty' grades amounts to 45.8% this year (a slight increase from last year’s 44.1%). This overall consistency is explained by the strong marketing identity HEMA has developed for its Sinterklaas products, which remained unchanged in 2020.

**Graph 7**

![Graph 7](image)

In-store observations confirm this emerging brand identity based on Sooty Piets. See, for instance, this gift wrap in a HEMA in Den Haag (see figure 13).

**Figure 13**

![Image of gift wrap](image)
**Kruidvat**

Kruidvat loves grade 2 (silhouette/shadow of Piet-like figure): its share increases to half of all Sinterklaas products from last year’s 43.7% (see figure 14 for a detail of one of these products). While the grade 1 share decreases somewhat, there is a significant decrease in grade 7 products (18.8% to 8.3%). Only half the number of last year’s products were found online.

**Graph 8**

There were no in-store observations for Kruidvat in 2020.

**Figure 14**
**Ekoplaza**

Ekoplaza shows very few Sinterklaas-related products online and all are grade 1. It should be noted however that previous years’ in-store fieldwork has found some products there that were differently displayed, and would therefore also be graded differently if they appeared online. Since no in-store fieldwork has been done for Ekoplaza this year’s report, it is impossible to say whether this score is genuinely 100% grade 1. Ekoplaza grade 1 generic speculaas (figure 15).

**Figure 15**

![Ekoplaza speculaas](image)

**Jamin**

We found less than half of the number of last year’s products on the confectionary shop’s website. This is why one speculaas-pop (see figure 5) explains the relatively large share of grade 7 in a sea of grade 1, whereas Jamin was completely grade 1 last year.

**Graph 9**

![Jamin 2020](image)
**Etos**

Etos also showed very few products when compared to other stores in the study, as it did last year. 66.7% of these were grade 1 (up from last year’s 40%). The other products were either grade 2 or 2a.

**Graph 10**

There was an in-store observation for Etos, however. In Den Haag, a team member observed grade 3 costume packaging for children (figure 16).

**Figure 16**

**Xenos**

The most notable development for Xenos this year is the increase in grade 5, at the expense of 5a’s share. Nonetheless, the totals for the two ‘sooty’ grades are down: from 42.3% last year
to 37.5% now, though still the largest share for Xenos’ house brand Sinterklaas products (see figure 17).

**Graph 11**

Interestingly, like Blokker, grade 7 showed an increase: from not present last year to a share of 18% now. This seems like a massive increase, but considering only 16 products were found this year for Xenos (compared to 26 last year) this increase consists of only three products: taaltaai in the shape of Sinterklaas’ and Piet’s faces (figure 18), a Sinterklaas decoration (figure 17) and a toy. Unlike Blokker however, grade 1 showed an increase and no grade 8 was found.

**Figure 17**

An in-store observation in Den Haag yielded a grade 5a sticker sheet in the Xenos Sinterklaas house style (figure 19).
**Intertoys**

Intertoys, like the aforementioned supermarkets, shows a massive increase in the grade 1 share (14.3% in 2019 to 62.5% in 2020). Similarly, grade 7 has completely vanished from its online offerings, while it made up almost 30% of the total last year. Finally, Intertoys completes the trend triptych by showing a notably less diverse collection of grades overall (down from five grades to three).

**Graph 12**

There was no in-store data collection for Intertoys in 2020.
In August 2020 Bol.com stated it would no longer allow blackface imagery on its platform, specifically blackfaced Zwarte Piet imagery (Dutch News, 2020b). This move by Bol.com came as a reaction to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, and was one of several major online marketplaces in the Netherlands banning blackface imagery, following Dutch online retailer Wehkamp and tech sellers Coolblue, and followed by international giants Facebook, Google/Youtube and Amazon (NL Times, 2020e). As with these other companies, for Bol.com there was a severe racist backlash to their decision; for instance, online calls to boycott the platform, and racist comments on pictures of Black models featured on their site (RTV Utrecht, 2020).

As can be seen in our previous reports, Bol.com does not have a very good record regarding racist imagery and was usually one of the worst performing stores in our research, if not the worst, especially in the books, music, DVD and costume categories. Moreover, though last year saw a rise in the number of grade 1 products, the share of grade 7 and 8 products was as high as the year before at roughly 45%. In 2019, the company started to add smiley emoji faces to pictures of blackfaced models in Zwarte Piet costumes in order to literally cover this practice up (ERIF, 2020: 51), but grade 8 imagery was still very present throughout their website.

Therefore, how did Bol.com perform in 2020? Have they been able to keep their promise in banning blackface from their site so far? According to our research, still not entirely, although it seems that the policy is working to a certain extent. Whereas grade 7 last year had the largest share of 30.6% of all products, now it’s at 12.6% (see graph 13 on the next page). More importantly, grade 8 - which represents exactly those products Bol.com promised to ban - does indeed show a significant drop from 14.9% in 2019 to 4.5% now. However, it’s not completely gone by any means. Blackface still shows up especially on DVD covers (20%) (see figure 20), music (CDs) and costumes (both 6.7%). On the other hand, grade 8 is completely gone in all other categories, including books and puzzles/games, which historically saw a significant presence of blackface imagery via Bol.com.

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6 Although both Wehkamp and Coolblue do make exceptions for products such as music, books and DVDs that continue to feature blackface imagery, because of issues around so-called ‘freedom of speech’ (Quekel, 2020).
Graph 13

Bol.com 2020

44%
12%
17%
22%
3%
3%
12%

grade 1  grade 2  grade 2a  grade 3  grade 4
grade 4a  grade 5  grade 5a  grade 7  grade 8

Figure 20

Club van Sinterklaas seizoen 2 t/m 5

Serie: De Club Van Sinterklas
Rating: ★★★★★ 5.0/5 (1 review)
On the other side of our spectrum, grade 1 is significantly up to 44.1%, from 27.3%, and interestingly, Bol.com seems to be the only store in our research where grade 5 (sooty Piets; see figure 21) has substantially increased its share: from 9.9% last year to 18% this year - almost a doubling. We can attribute this mostly to the costumes, DVDs and music categories where “Black” caricatures and blackface imagery seem to have been largely replaced with sooty Piets (see also graph 14). Bol.com, apparently, is following the trend already set by other stores last year, but is finally catching up.

Figure 21

Graph 14

grades % per Bol.com category 2020

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Grade 1</th>
<th>Grade 2</th>
<th>Grade 2a</th>
<th>Grade 3</th>
<th>Grade 4</th>
<th>Grade 4a</th>
<th>Grade 5</th>
<th>Grade 5a</th>
<th>Grade 6</th>
<th>Grade 7</th>
<th>Grade 8</th>
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<td>babies/toddlers</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Beyond the stores

As our in-store fieldwork has shown repeatedly, smaller non-chain stores like bakeries (the usual suspects in using racist imagery around Sinterklaas), or franchised local stores such as pharmacies, often sell problematic products and/or use highly offensive decorations. Although the in-store fieldwork was severely limited this year due to Covid-19, as stated above, our team members still encountered some of this imagery, like in the small town of Culemborg in the middle of the country, where a bakery (figure 22) as well as a lingerie store (figure 23) used grade 7 Zwarte Piet dolls to decorate their windows.

Figure 22

Figure 23

In Harderwijk, more to the north of the Netherlands, a bakery used grades 5 and 5a imagery on their advertising flyer (figure 24).

Figure 24
Furthermore, even beyond the Sinterklaas season, a *jute zak* featuring a grade 7 image was spotted in a playground in Den Haag around Easter time in 2021 (see figure 25).

**Figure 25**

![Sinterklaas at the movies](image)

*Sinterklaas at the movies*

Sinterklaas movies are almost an entirely separate genre in the Netherlands. As sadly evidenced by the DVD category in our Bol.com research, most of them have been using blackface for their Zwarte Piet characters, though we have seen some changes over recent years. This led our team to consider whether these movies are still being offered online (via streaming services) and in cinemas.

Upon investigation, we found that Netflix stopped offering Sinterklaas-themed movies in the Netherlands in 2018. The reason Netflix Nederland gives for this is due to expired contracts with distributors, though it is generally assumed it is because of the use of blackface in a lot of these movies (RTL Nieuws, 2018). It is interesting that the company does not want to state this reasoning openly, unlike Amazon, Facebook and Google (also international, US-based organisations), who did state their reasoning for banning blackface clearly. Then again, these companies did arrive at ostensibly the same policy two years after Netflix, and only in the wake of fierce, global BLM protests.

Entirely Dutch streaming service Videoland, on the other hand, via its owner RTL Nederland, claims to value this ‘Dutch tradition’ enormously and continues to offer Sinterklaas movies, including those featuring blackface characters (ibid). Surprisingly, a quick search shows that Amazon Prime also still sells Sinterklaas movies with blackfaced characters (see figure 26), despite Amazon HQ pledging not to offer any products with blackface (NL Times, 2020e).

Meanwhile, Pathé - the biggest cinema chain in the Netherlands - made the decision last September to not show any movies containing a blackface Zwarte Piet anymore, in response
to the similar decisions by Bol.com, Coolblue and the other companies mentioned above, claiming they want to be henceforth inclusive to all of their customers (NL Times, 2020f).

Figure 26
**Conclusions**

The trend we have seen towards grade 1 and away from grades 7 and 8 in previous years takes a bit of a leap this year. We can easily draw the conclusion that this is influenced by the BLM movement, which became part of the existing KOZP movement in the Netherlands last year. The decreased share of grade 8 overall (from 4% down to 2%) can especially be ascribed largely to Bol.com banning blackface from their site, even if not entirely successfully, which was itself a direct reaction to BLM. Until 2020, a lot of the companies featured in our research have been using some form of the argument that Zwarte Piet is not about race and racism, or that critiquing the character is somehow employing US arguments that do not ‘fit’ in the Dutch context. It is interesting how that rhetoric has suddenly changed after the BLM protests of 2020.

We can wonder, then, if these developments in the stores are reflective of a broadening consensus in the Netherlands against blackfaced Zwarte Piet, or if it is more indicative of a fear of being associated with racism, potentially resulting in a loss of income. The language used by these companies is usually one of inclusion and feelings: people can ‘feel’ offended by these images and that’s why they are taken down, not because the people in charge of those companies actually believe this imagery to be racist in and of itself. This attitude seems to be mirrored by the Eénvandaag research panel who showed that support for blackfaced Zwarte Piet declined more this year than ever before. Where last year 71% of the people interviewed still believed Zwarte Piet should ‘remain black’, to paraphrase Prime Minister Rutte, this year that number is down to 55%. This seems to be in line with our findings, but if we take a deeper look at the reasoning behind this we see that in essence not very much has changed. A whopping 78% of people still believe blackfaced Zwarte Piet is not racist, and it turns out that most people who still want to change the character want to do this to ‘keep the peace’ instead out of actual anti-racist considerations (Lubbe and Kester, 2020). This notion can be seen as an expression of the Dutch cultural norm of *polderen* - i.e. the practice to find a middle ground to and reach a compromise in order to avoid conflict. It is the same process that made the *Roetveeg Piet* (sooty Piet) such a prominent feature from 2019 onwards (ERIF, 2019: 40).

It seems, after BLM, that the producers and purveyors of Sinterklaas-related products do not really know what to do with Zwarte Piet and, afraid of being called racist, focus instead more on the figure of Sinterklaas. This might be why grade 1 is increasingly popular at the cost (this year at least) not only of grades 7 and 8, but also of the other ‘in-between’ grades, which show less variety than last year. Even the ‘sooty Piet’ grades 5 and 5a, which we projected to keep growing as an answer to the traditional blackfaced Piet last year, are stagnant this year.

Superficially at least, things are indeed moving in the right direction, both within the scope of this research and within Dutch society as a whole. However, the Dutch are, for either monetary or cultural reasons, generally not ready to actually call out Zwarte Piet for the racist phenomenon it is. This unwillingness in the acknowledgement of Dutch racism is not new; It was already pointed out by Philomena Essed in her seminal work *Everyday Racism* (1990). The Dutch Black women interviewed back then ‘repeatedly state that Dutch [white] people are “two-faced”: not saying what they mean and not meaning what they say’ (Essed, 1990: 56). As long as Dutch people, companies and institutions do not admit this implicit racism actually exists, rely on the deliberate misconception of hurt feelings and the repressive argument of ‘keeping the peace’, we cannot get to the root of the problem of systemic and institutional racism in the Netherlands. Therefore, societal change will remain allusive.
Appendix A – List of references


Otto, R. (2020) 'Facebook verwijdert grootste zwartepietenpagina's met duizenden leden'. NU.nl. Available: https://www.nu.nl/tech/6075133/facebook-verwijdert-grootste-zwartepietenpaginas-met-duizenden-leden.html?fbclid=IwAR0h9GwF1ux2m8EVXUkHv7F9EU3Pp4csc9YRIOLEDHoDjjM_IVjOt8cpQs


https://www.parool.nl/nederland/topman-blokker-internet-heeft-de-klant-volkommen-verpest-b948b7f2/
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Figure 4 (page 13): Screencapture of a add on facebook mobile by HEMA, taken around the Sinterklaas period 2020.

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Graph 2 (page 15): share per grade per store in % in 2020

Graph 3 (page 17): share per grade in % for Albert Heijn in 2020.

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Graph 13 (page 28): share per grade in % for Bol.com in 2020 (all products).

Graph 14 (page 29): share per grade per Bol.com category in % in 2020.
Appendix C: glossary of Sinterklaas-specific terms

Chocolate letter
Chocolate letters of the alphabet, traditionally given to people as a present during the Sinterklaas festival. Commonly, one receives the first letter of their first name. Chocolate letters can be of all types of chocolate and may also include almonds, raisins, etc.

Intocht
Annual parade in November, typically attended by several thousand people, at which Sinterklaas and his many Zwarte Pieten enter the Netherlands by steamboat. The intocht is the official start of the Sinterklaas festival, culminating on the 5th of December.

Jute zak
A burlap bag, which traditionally contains the gifts and sweets Sinterklaas hands out to children and which is carried for him by his Piets. Children used to be told that if they had misbehaved, the Piets would take them back to Spain (Sinterklaas headquarters) with them in the same burlap bag. This last part of the story has gone out of favor recently however, since it is thought not to be educationally correct to threaten children with abduction.

Kick Out Zwarte Piet
Kick Out Zwarte Piet (KOZP) is a collective of activist groups and platforms in the Netherlands (Nederland Wordt Beter, Zwarte Piet Niet and Stop Blackface), who - by means of peaceful protest - aim to end the existence of the racist figure of Zwarte Piet.

Kruidnoten
A type of cookie, small, crunchy and dark brown, prepared with speculaas spices (see under Speculaas), traditionally eaten during the Sinterklaas festival. Commonly, Zwarte Piet has sacks of these cookies from which he hands them out to children and/or throws them into the crowd.

Pepernoten
A type of cookie, small, brown and pellet shaped, prepared with aniseed or as speculaas, traditionally eaten during the Sinterklaas festival. Commonly, Zwarte Piet has sacks of these cookies from which he hands them out to children and/or throws them into the crowd.

Roetveegpiet Piet
Character who, instead of full blackface with big red lips and gold hoop earrings, has smudges of soot on his face on account of the story that Piet enters houses to deliver presents through the chimney. Since about 2017 in a limited number of Dutch municipalities (mostly in the West of the country), the roetveegpiet has come to replace the traditional Zwarte Piet due to protest against this character.

Sinterklaas
Also known as Saint Nicholas, based on the historical figure of the bishop of Myra who lived in the 3rd century AD in Asia Minor. For unknown reasons - but most likely due to Dutch history in which the Spanish played an important part - it is sometimes (mistakenly) claimed that Sinterklaas hails from Spain. Sinterklaas is the main protagonist of a festival in his name on the 5th of December (in the Netherlands and some of its former colonies) and the 6th of December (in Belgium). The character is most commonly portrayed as an old white man with a beard, red miter and cloak, riding a white horse. In this report, Sinterklaas refers to both the character and the festival.

Speculaas
A type of cookie, usually hard, flat and rectangular but sometimes also soft, round and filled with almond paste. The cookies are made with speculaas herbs. Commonly these are cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves, ginger powder, cardamom and white pepper, all of which were first obtained by the Dutch in the East Indies. Speculaas is traditionally eaten during the festival of Sinterklaas, but can be found in shops year-round.

**Taaitaai**
A type of soft (or tough = taai) cookie, traditionally eaten during the festival of Sinterklaas. Its taste resembles that of speculaas but includes aniseed. Taaitaai are usually baked in the shape of characters from the Sinterklaas festival, such as Sinterklaas and Zwarte Piet.

**Tweede Kamer**
The Tweede Kamer (‘Second Chamber’) is the Dutch House of Representatives and the main legislative body of the bicameral parliament of the Netherlands.

**Zwarte Piet**
Character portrayed as the helper of Sinterklaas. Traditionally, Zwarte Piet (Black Pete) arrives with Sinterklaas and helps to deliver presents through the chimney to ‘good’ children and/or punish ‘bad’ children on behalf of Sinterklaas. The current shape of Zwarte Piet was designed by Jan Schenkman, an author of a children’s book on Sinterklaas from 1850. Despite occasional recent changes (see roetveegpiet above) Zwarte Piet is most commonly portrayed as a white person in blackface, with an Afro wig, big red lips and/or gold hoop earrings.