

ERIF Sinterklaas Brand & Product Study 2022

Sneaky Piets and Shirked Responsibilities



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Cover art: photo by Rosemary Carlton-Willis of a Piet hat decoration in coffee shop 't Koffieboontje in Utrecht, the Netherlands, November 2021.
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We hope this seventh report will continue to shine a light on your achievements as well as on the state of white supremacy in the Netherlands.

Introduction

The 2021 Sinterklaas season in the Netherlands marked 10 years since the violent arrests of peaceful anti-Zwarte Piet demonstrators Quinsy Gario and Jerry Afriyie in Dordrecht. While Gario had actually begun his artistic *Zwarte Piet is Racisme* campaign over the summer of 2011, it was the viral news of him (alongside Afriyie and two students) being brutally attacked by police during a Sinterklaas *intocht* in November that seemed to galvanise a new generation behind his slogan. Over the next decade, grass-roots activists have gathered and organised throughout the country to change the image of Zwarte Piet, make Sinterklaas more inclusive and, more generally, open up a dialogue about Dutch racism.

The protests, especially over Zwarte Piet, are ongoing. For instance, in December 2021 campaigners hung a *Zwarte Piet is Racisme* banner from an old VOC boat as a campaign against the blackface caricature and the Netherlands' more general veneration of its colonial past (NL Times, 2021). Anti-Zwarte Piet campaigners graffitied in protest in Zaandam (Smit & Pijlman, 2021). Also, a demonstration was also held in Volendam by the coalition group Kick Out Zwarte Piet (Jebbink, 2021); this action was countered by violent, racist thugs (NOS, 2021) as has become the norm for anti-racism demonstrations in the Netherlands. It is true that support to forever remove Zwarte Piet from Sinterklaas is maintained on the whole (Klapwijk, 2021). Nonetheless, racist depictions of Black people persist in Dutch advertising, whether that's during Sinterklaas or elsewhere—as was seen during Amazon.nl's "Black Friday" promotional campaign (Yolande, 2021). Thus, as the tensions around this debate continue, so does the need for our longitudinal research on the evolution of Sinterklaas-related branding and products, which we started in 2015. Combining online data collection and image-coding with in-store observations across the Netherlands, we have been able once again to develop insights around what specific marketing decisions can tell us about Dutch identity and culture.

While depictions of "traditional" Zwarte Piets do remain in both public and private spaces, our study captured an interesting shake up of certain trends we had captured in our more recent reports. Jamin's (online) products were all graded as 1 for the very first time in our study based on 2021 data collection. We also noted that frequent breaker of trends Blokker once again offered a mixed bag featuring lots of grade 7 items. Even more notably, we observed more diversity among Piets on packaging and in ads: i.e. mixtures of people who would be racialised on sight as (WRA¹) having various (racial) backgrounds, both real and illustrated, as the Piet character (grade 4). There was a much more obvious increase in grade 2 items and packaging, which we conclude in this report to be a reflection of the rise in use of the "Sneaky Piet".

We have also noted more use of *brownface* (use of a brown face-paint instead of pitch black face-paint) in depicting Zwarte Piet, especially in films and online shows. Specifically, a new YouTube series launched in 2021 called *De Staff van Sinterklaas*, utilises brownface deliberately to show tanned Piets living and working in Spain (AD, 2021). In a rather bizarre twist to his decade-long endeavor (within a much longer historical context of uncompromising anti-racist work), Jerry Afriyie publically endorsed the show and its depiction of the Piets (ibid)—who are essentially in blackface-lite. Visual media such as TV and film are still important in directing the general imagining of the Sinterklaas festival and narrative, especially for children. Therefore, it will be necessary for our study to continue to monitor developments here in order to understand the various relevant cultural influencing factors.

¹ Throughout the text we use the acronym WRA for the longer phrase: "would be racialised as". Here we take into account mainstream racialising practices that arbitrarily group people based on physical attributes such as skin colour, facial features and/or hair texture.

Covid-19 in the Netherlands hampered our in-store research in late 2021, as fewer fieldworkers could be secured, especially in the north, south and eastern parts of the country. In fact, the situation was so bad that for a second year in a row, certain Sinterklaas arrival parades (intochten) were cancelled, for example in Utrecht (RTV Utrecht, 2021). On the other hand, our online data results (numerically) are up on previous years, and we have explored a variety of possible reasons for this further in the report. One significant potential reason we are particularly intrigued by is to do with “hidden” Piets (i.e. those not tagged as Sinterklaas products in a search on supermarket and shop websites). Once we discovered this was the case, we adjusted our search methods to find these so-called “hidden” Piets, thereby increasing our data load. We had made a start in 2019 with collecting data from Dutch stores, such as HEMA, in other countries, as well as Sinterklaas products sold in stores in Belgium (Parnell-Berry et al., 2020). However, because of the pandemic we have not been able to continue this; we will have to anticipate what the 2022 fieldwork round will bring for next year’s report.

Some Sinterklaas-related products like chocolate and toys were said to be cheaper in 2021 (Nu.nl, 2021b). At the same time, these traditional and familiar items were being overshadowed and crowded out somewhat by the ongoing influx of Halloween and Christmas products being displayed throughout the same period and targeted at exactly the same audience for the most part. Our study captures parts of this and speculates briefly on what it might mean. We will continue to tentatively observe this alongside our usual Sinterklaas data collection, in order to monitor a potential impact that it might have in terms of commerce and marketing.

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 2021. 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).

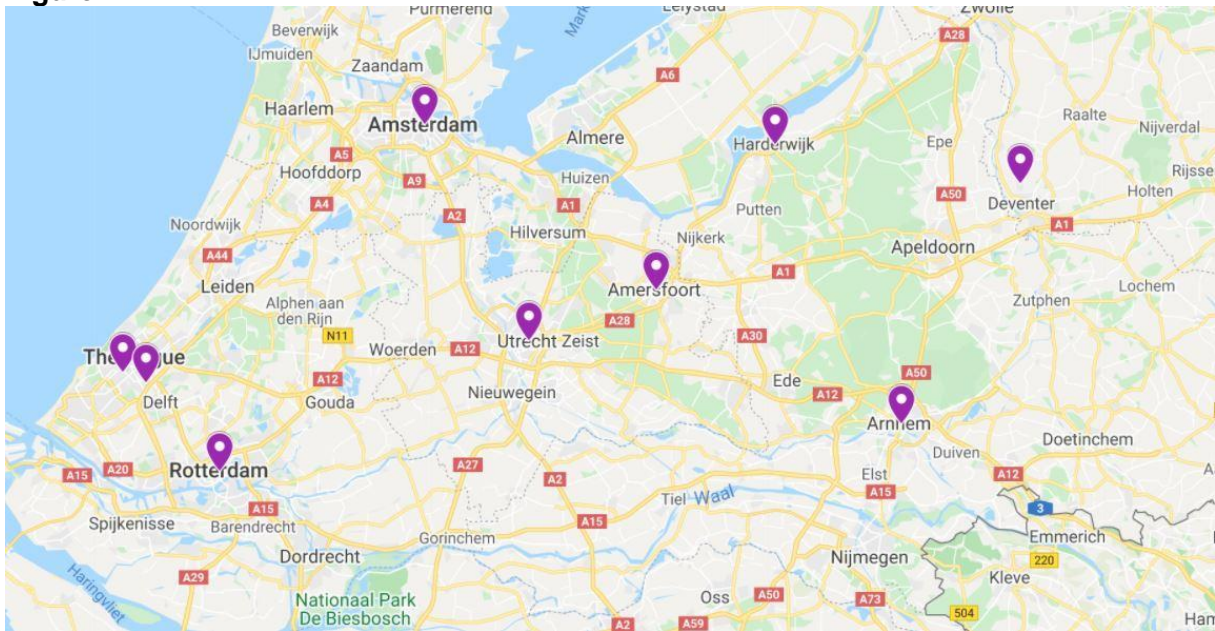
The online phase of the research takes place over three sessions, where the team collects Sinterklaas-specific products to review via the given store’s website. This part of the research is completed by an internal ERIF study team. For Bol.com analyses, unlike with other stores (such as Albert Heijn 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, lastly, babies and toddlers. Historically, we have simply entered “Sinterklaas” as a search term in each of the respective store websites and then graded the products that come up. However, it was noted during the fieldwork for this report that for certain stores (namely: Bol.com, Kruidvat, Plus, Blokker and Jumbo), only using “Sinterklaas” as a search term meant that Piet-specific items were not appearing in the results. In other words, stores and brands are effectively hiding their Piet-related content (specifically costumes), by not tagging them as Sinterklaas products. We therefore needed to adjust our search to also specifically mentioning “Piet” in order to pick up those additional items.

In-store fieldwork takes place more continuously over two months (rather than in only three individual sessions), and includes a broader fieldwork team to carry out the observations, active throughout the Netherlands. In addition to reviewing Sinterklaas-specific products, 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.

In addition to the usual Sinterklaas-specific products and advertisements usually sought after for observation, for this report fieldworkers also targeted Halloween and Christmas materials more intentionally during the same period (October to early December). This preliminary exercise was meant to capture the prevalence of merchandise in the main stores during this festive period, in addition to how Christmas and Halloween may be gaining ground over Sinterklaas, both in terms of market-share as well as cultural relevance.

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 to or result in expressions of hostility towards the fieldworker. However, this year’s fieldwork was significantly hampered by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. Safety concerns, lockdowns and closed stores meant fieldwork could not be done as extensively this year as shown in previous reports (pre-2020). 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-area and fewer, unfortunately, in the rest of the Netherlands (see figure 1, p8).

Figure 1



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.

Grade Code	Grade Description
1	No Piet character visible on Sinterklaas specific product packaging or advertising.
2	Silhouette/shadow of a Piet-like figure on Sinterklaas specific product packaging or advertising.
2a	Piets presented as (cartoon) animals on Sinterklaas specific product packaging or advertising.
3	White Piet (either real person or cartoon) with no face-paint of any kind on Sinterklaas specific product packaging or advertising.
4	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.
4a	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.
5	White Piets (real or cartoon) with “sooty” faces on Sinterklaas specific product packaging or advertising.

5a	Non-white Piets (real or cartoon) with “sooty” faces on Sinterklaas specific product packaging or advertising.
6	Multi-coloured (with the use of face-paint) Piets (real or cartoon) on Sinterklaas specific product packaging or advertising.
7	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.
8	Real people only (ie. in photographs) wearing blackface to portray Zwarte Piet, with exaggerated/stereotypical, racist features on Sinterklaas specific product packaging or advertising.

The analysis and write-up phase of the research (January to April 2022) 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 2021 online and in-store fieldwork

Introduction

In last year's report, we noted the decrease in the number of total products over the previous years. This year's research however has shown a very significant increase in that number: from 345 last year to 475 this year. While not on the same level of the 2019 report of over 570 products (Parnell-Berry et al., 2019), this is still remarkable. Based on our observations, we believe this to be mainly a manifestation of the immensely increased variety of confectionery Sinterklaas-related products, especially kruidnoten and chocolate letters. There is a huge range of different flavours, coverings (mostly varying kinds of chocolate) and styles for these products available, from both house brands and premium brands like Bolletje and Verkade (see figures 2 and 3). Though this development has been a few years in the making already, it really seems to have taken off in 2021, so much so that these new varieties pushed out the more traditional taaitaai, which has not seen the same diversification in flavorings, and even led Bolletje to stop its production (Nu.nl, 2021a). Our research supports this development; we found eight grade 7 taaitaai products in 2020 and only four such products in 2021. In our online fieldwork, the increase for the other products was most noticeable in the supermarkets Albert Heijn (from 29 products recorded last year, to 97 this year), Jumbo (53 to 84) and, to a lesser extent, Plus (25 to 39). The total number of products for the rest of the stores combined (excluding Bol.com), only shows a slight increase overall (128 to 137).

Figure 2



Figure 3



A second reason for the increase in number of products found could potentially be the fact that we figured out Piet-specific items were being “hidden” at certain stores, meaning that using the search term “Sinterklaas” did not result in those items appearing for grading. As noted in the Methodology chapter above, noticing this meant we needed to slightly modify our data collection approach, by also searching for Sinterklaas products using the search term “Piet”, thereby enabling us to add further merchandise to our analysis that otherwise would have been missed. It is entirely possible that this has been a gradual development over the past few years among certain shops and brands, contributing to the decline in online products tagged under

“Sinterklaas”, as we have been noting across our reports. While for us as researchers, this is not the most efficiency-enhancing development, the other side of this is that if consumers want to purchase Piet-related items during Sinterklaas, they have to very intentionally seek them out when shopping online at certain stores.

Christmas and Halloween

Another theory we speculated in last year’s report, was around the potential relationship of the then decrease in products and the advancing of Halloween and Christmas products, which we interpreted as being to the detriment of Sinterklaas festivities (Kerkmeijer et al., 2021: p12). While this year’s increase in the variety of some specific Sinterklaas-related confectionary products at first glance seems to complicate this notion, it is worth pointing out that this phenomenon concerns kruidnoten especially. Kruidnoten are less associated with the Sinterklaas festival and more generally with the December period, while taaitaai is more associated with Sinterklaas. In this sense then, the more specific Sinterklaas-related product is still becoming less popular (Nu.nl. 2021a). This specificity of edible (but also wearable) Sinterklaas products seems to be a key factor when compared to Christmas products. For example, during Christmas one can eat any kind of food or give and/or receive any kind of gift, meaning the possibility for “Christmas” items is essentially limitless. This became evident in the results of the first tentative quantitative data collection we did this year for Christmas and Halloween products.

Figure 4



Using “Kerst” (Dutch for Christmas) as a search term at each of our stores’ websites generated more than 9,000 results in total, often showing various kinds of foods and toys. This is even excluding Bol.com, though we saw that several products in, for instance, the toys, games, CDs and decorations categories there were marketed for both Sinterklaas and Christmas (see also Figures 4 and 9), which is another sign of Christmas creeping in on the Sinterklaas territory. The products being more generalised broadens the market for Christmas meaning, for instance, that some international brands like Lays and Kellogg’s are able to change their packaging for some of their products into a Christmas-y style during the holiday period. Furthermore, our in-store fieldwork shows that in shops around the country, Sinterklaas has had to compete with Santa over and over again throughout November, as evidenced by Sinterklaas displays being literally surrounded by Christmas products in stores such as Xenos, HEMA and Kruidvat (see Figures 5 and 6, p12). This is not to say that certain brands have not embraced Christmas and blended it with their Sinterklaas imagery and storytelling! Online data collection led us to the DVD cover of a Sinterklaas film series, actually featuring a Santa Claus standing next to a Sinterklaas, producing a playful take on the competing Saint Nicholas narratives (see Figure 11, page 14).

Figure 5



Figure 6



Meanwhile, when we used the search term “Halloween”, we received a general result of some 380 products, which is in line with its lesser stature in the Netherlands, although the festival certainly has a definite presence by now. This was evidenced by banners on the websites of Jumbo, Albert Heijn and Intertoys (see Figure 7), among others, as well as in displays at Hema and elsewhere. In the Hema, at the Grottemarktstraat in Den Haag all three festivals were co-existing peacefully during the month of October (see Figure 8 on page 13).

Figure 7

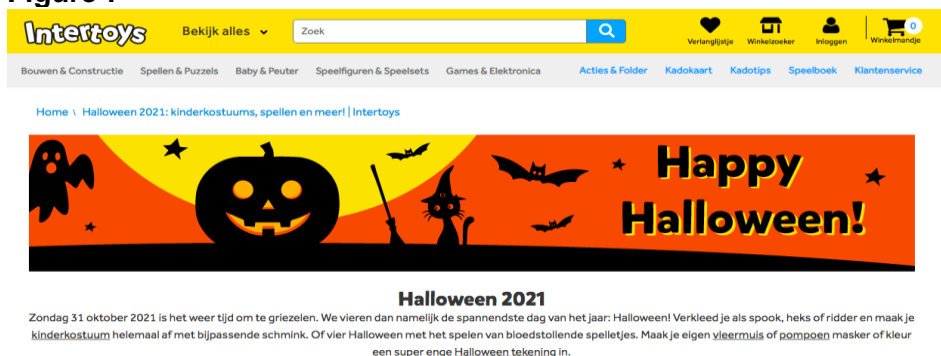


Figure 8



New developments: “diversity”, brownface and the rise of the “Sneaky Piet”

This year has seen some other interesting developments. The first is an increase in people and (especially) children of colour being portrayed either as Piets or, in the case of children, as themselves on Sinterklaas-related products and packaging. This is by no means an entirely new development (see, for example, last year’s banners with children of colour portraying Sinterklaas; Kerkmeijer et al., 2021, p13), but it is striking how many more of these cases we encountered this year (see Figures 9 and 10). This development is reflected in the grades. Specifically in the tripling of the grade 4 share (Multiple Piets portrayed by or as having (cartoon or real) any ethnicity (including white!), with no face paint of any kind), from 0,9% to 2,7% and in the doubling of the number of products with a combination of grade 5 (white Piets with sooty faces) and grade 5a (non-white Piets with sooty faces), from four last year to eight now.

Figure 9



Figure 10



The second and more outrightly disconcerting development is the use of brownface on Sinterklaas-related products and media. On the *Club van Sinterklaas* CD and DVD packaging (see Figure 11), available on Bol.com, multiple Piets look to have been painted with brown make-up, on top of which sooty streaks have been applied. In the detail of the DVD cover of the film *Waar is het grote boek van Sinterklaas?* (see Figure 11a), this is most noticeable on the Piet in pink and the Piet in green with the “Coole Piet” necklace. The afro wig of the pink-clad Piet and the afro-locs wig of the green-clad Piet add to the overall appearance and feeling of them actually portraying Zwarte Piets (i.e. Piets in blackface). We therefore graded them as such (grade 8), as the implied racial mimicry is illustrated strongly here, regardless of the actual colouring of the face-paint. For instance, the fake locs used in this poster are employed not only to signify the supposed trendiness of the “Coole” Piet, but also his proximity to blackness, based on his wearing an afro hairstyle.

Figure 11



Figure 11a



Furthermore, beyond the stores we usually study, brownface is also used more directly in a new YouTube series for children called *De Staff van Sinterklaas* (2021) (see Figure 12). The Piets and also some supporting characters, who are supposed to be living in Spain according to the series, are deliberately brownfaced (AD, 2021).

Figure 12



Finally, we have noticed a growing tendency to obscure the figure of (Zwarte) Piet, both on packaging and in ads, in one way or another. This is usually where we give a product a grade 2: the figure can be very small and hardly noticeable, or only shown as a shadow or silhouette (see Figure 13). It can be represented by just a classic Piet hat with a feather, or the typical and recognisable page outfit. We have even noticed an increase in cases where the Piets face is obscured somehow, while the rest of the body gives away who the character is (see Figure 14). We have dubbed this (grade 2) phenomenon “Sneaky Piet” as it becomes increasingly pervasive in our research: on Xenos products, Jumbo kruidnoten, on Tony’s Choclonely chocolate letters as well as those of Verkade and elsewhere. In terms of the overall impact this is having on our data-set, products graded as 2 have moved from just under 3% in our first report (Parnell-Berry et al., 2016), to being at 12% in this report (see Graph 1 on page 16).

Figure 13



Figure 14

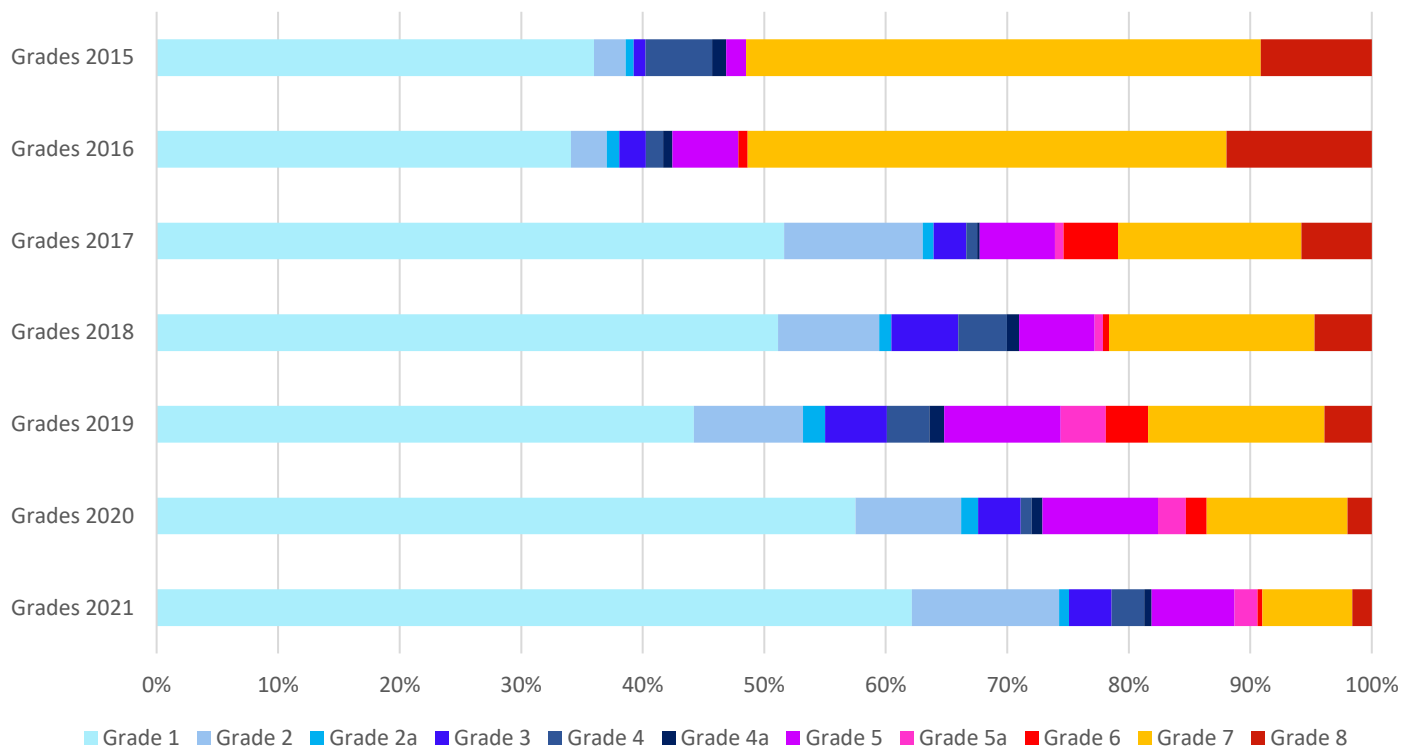


Changes between 2020 and 2021

In 2021, there were no changes in the stores used for the online data collection in 2020. The ERIF team graded a total of 475 products, of which 363 came from the websites of the various chain stores, and 112 further products were graded on Bol.com (Graph 1 on page 18).

Graph 1

Overall % grade share per year 2015-2021



After last year's significant increase, as a consequence of 2020's Black Lives Matter demonstrations and movement (Kerkmeijer et al., 2021: p33), we see a somewhat smaller rise in the share of grade 1 in 2021 (57,5% to 62,1%, compared to last year's jump from 44,9% to 57,5%). The general trend of the increase of grade 1 (no Piet visible) over the years continues, however. Accordingly, on the other side of the scale the shares of grades 7 (Piets depicted as being of African descent and/or using features to mock Black people) and 8 (blackface portrayal of Zwarte Piet) continue to fall, too: grade 7 from 11,6% to 7,4% and grade 8 from 2% to 1,6%. Especially grade 7 has a smaller share, mainly because we saw less taaitaai in the supermarkets, as noted above. In this way, the increasing variety in more popular confectionary cookies and candies, usually with grades on the less severe side of our grading system, pushes out grade 7 and subsequently the more obviously racist imagery in stores.

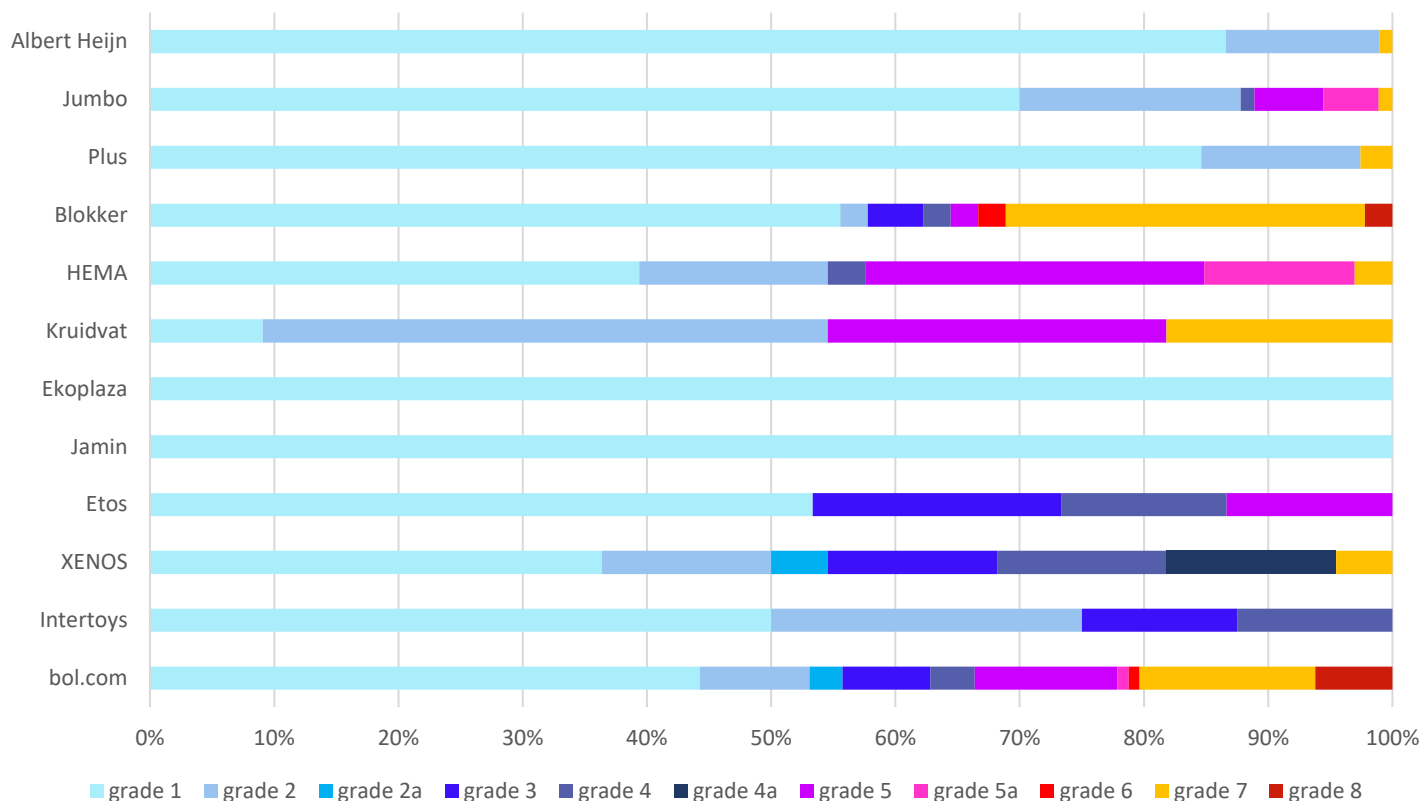
The growth of grade 1 is mainly curtailed by the increase in shares of grade 2 (8,7% to 12,1%), and to a lesser extent grade 4 (0,9% to 2,7%). The obvious increase in grade 2 is a reflection of the rise in use of the "Sneaky Piet", while the growth in grade 4 (multiple (cartoon or real) Piets portrayed by or as having any ethnicity/race, with no face paint of any kind) reflects the increased diversity in depictions of Piets and children used on Sinterklaas products. This is also supported by the fact that we found quite a number of combinations of grades 5 (white Piets with sooty faces) and 5a (non-white Piets with sooty faces) on the same products and ads. Overall, however, the share of grades 5 and 5a is noticeably declining this year, for the first time since it's rise in 2016 (11,8% to 8,6% for both grades together). Another notable development is the near disappearance of the grade 6 multi-coloured Piets (or "rainbow"-Piets), which we have witnessed decline from 3,7% in 2019, to 1,7% in 2020 and even further down to 0,4% in 2021.

In the end, the growth of grades 2 and 4 keep the percentage of all grades between grade 1 and grades 7 and 8 stable at 28,8%, compared to last year's 28,9%, rather than this percentage declining further, as we noted in last year's report. The percentage of the newer interpretations

of the Zwarte Piet character (grades 2a until 6) declined for the second year in a row: from 20,2 percent last year to 16,7% now.

Graph 2

grades % per store 2021



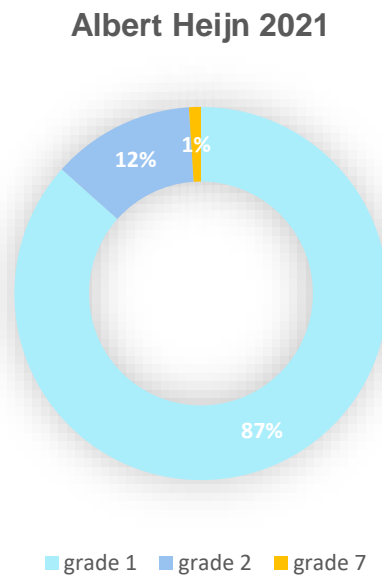
As we have seen trending in our more recent reports, only Bol.com and Blokker show any products featuring blackface (grade 8), which we explore in more depth below. We see two stores with 100% grade 1: Ekoplaza (another continued trend) and, for the first time, Jamin (Graph 2)! In Jamin's case, this is due to the fact they no longer offer taaitaai and speculaaspoppen—at least via their online store. For more on these cookies, see also last year's report (Kerkmeijer et al., 2021: p15).

Stores

Albert Heijn

Albert Heijn has seen the largest increase in number of Sinterklaas products, but remains very consistent in its branding style; the same three grades (1, 2 and 7) as in the previous two years apply. The grade 1 share has yet again increased, from 79,4% to 86,6%. Furthermore, as shown in many other stores this year, the grade 2 share also increased: from 10,3% to 12,4%. A very significant decrease occurs with grade 7: from 10,3% to just 1%, which represents just one taaitaai product we found compared to last year's 2 (the second product last year being Bolletje's). With the vastly increased number of products, grade 7's share is accordingly nearly gone for Albert Heijn.

Graph 3



Despite this, in-store fieldwork has yielded an observation of a grade 7 speculaaspop in an Albert Heijn in Den Haag (Figure 15)—a product that was not available online.

Figure 15



Jumbo

Jumbo usually shows a lot less consistency in grades than the other two supermarkets (Albert Heijn and Plus). This year presents little change in that regard. Like last year's report, we see a total number six grades across various products, which is double that of Albert Heijn's and Plus' three. This variety is also seen in the Jumbo home brand again, with products graded 1, 2, 4, 5, 5a and 7. Other than this general aspect, developments for Jumbo follow this year's trends to the letter: grade 1's share increases, though only by 2 percentage points. Grade 2 increases considerably however, from 7,5% to 17,8%. For an example of the grade 2 "Sneaky Piets", see these pepernoten with packaging illustrated with a Piet hat (see Figure 16, page 19).

Graph 4

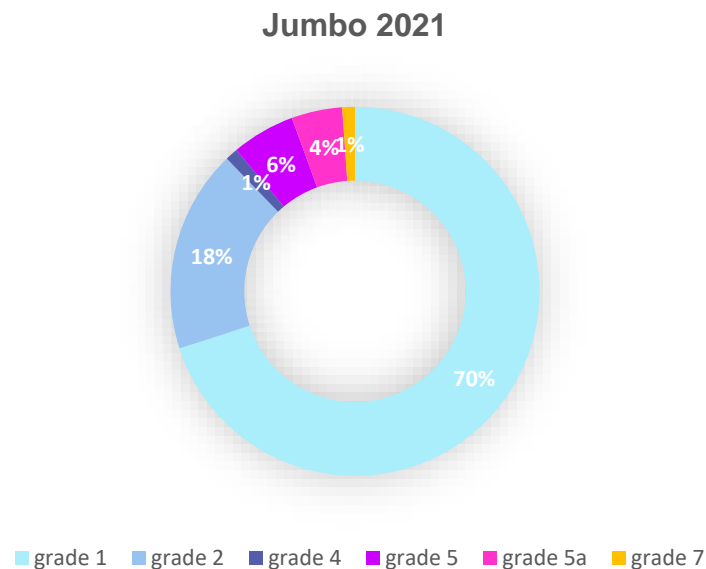


Figure 16



Grade 7 consists of only one product (only a 1% percent share of Jumbo's total), which means an even a bigger drop than Albert Heijn's. More remarkable even is the changes in the presence of grade 6 products at Jumbo: 2018 saw a whopping 41% grade 6 share, due to Jumbo's house brand adopting multi-coloured Piets as its main packaging design. However, this has in turn decreased in big leaps year-on-year, to 16,5% in 2019, 7,5% in 2020 until finally, in 2021, grade 6 products are not to be found online at Jumbo at all. In fact, Jumbo appears to use different house branding styles depending on the kinds of products, explaining the variety we were able to observe. While our research picked up mostly grades 1 and 2 for edible items, Jumbo employs a combination of grades 5 and 5a for its decorations, giving us clear examples of depictions of white people with sooty faces and people of colour with sooty faces (as Piets) on a Sinterklaas products (see Figure 17, page 20).

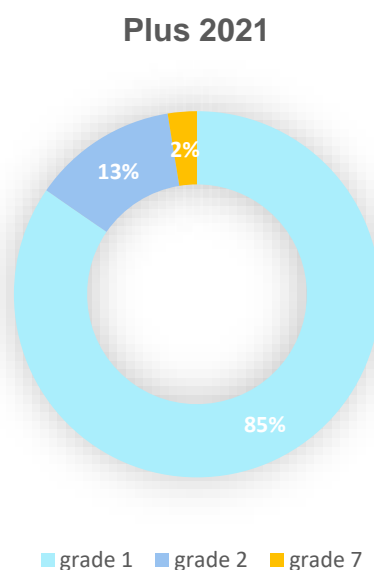
Figure 17



Plus

Plus looks to be the odd one out for the supermarkets this year, as it is the only one that actually decreased its share of grade 1 (from 92% to 84,6%). However, this is entirely due to the emergence of grade 2 products, which last year did not feature at all for Plus online and now has an almost 13% share. Here too, for grade 7 we only found one product: house brand taaitaai. Nevertheless, since the total number of products is smaller than at the other supermarkets, the overall share of grade 7 at Plus is larger (2,6%), though still very much lower than 2020's, when it was 8%, consisting almost entirely of Bolletje taaitaai products.

Graph 5



There were no 2021 in-store observations for Plus for us to report on in this year's study.

Blokker

Blokker, once again, shows us a very mixed bag this year. The company's traditional variety of grades, a result of the nature of the store offering many third-party products, remains and is comparable to Bol.com. It is no surprise then that it is only second to Bol.com again in the number of different grades awarded. On the other hand, Blokker deviates from expectations this year too, when it comes to following overall trends, though not as severely as in 2020, when it went squarely against almost all trends noted in our previous reports. Starting with the trends the store does follow: the share of grade 1 products actually grows slightly this year, after a decrease last year (from 53,4% in 2020 to 55,6% in 2021), though it's not yet back to the level of 2019 (57,4%). We also see an increase in grade 4 and a decrease in grade 8, cutting that share by half. Grade 8 is reduced to only one product: again in the books category. Where Blokker continues to go against the trend is most notably in its grade 7 share. This rises from 22,2% to almost 29%, making this the third year in a row where Blokker's grade 7 share rises. The grade shows up in all product categories (besides books also toys, costumes, gift wrap (see Figure 18, p24) and decorations). Other anti-trends Blokker shows compared to the other stores are a decrease in grade 2 (6,7% to 2,2%), and an increase in grade 3 (from 0 to 4,4%). While more stores go against the trends in some way or other this year (e.g. Kruidvat, Etos, Bol.com), Blokker seems to be making a habit of it.

Graph 6

Blokker 2021

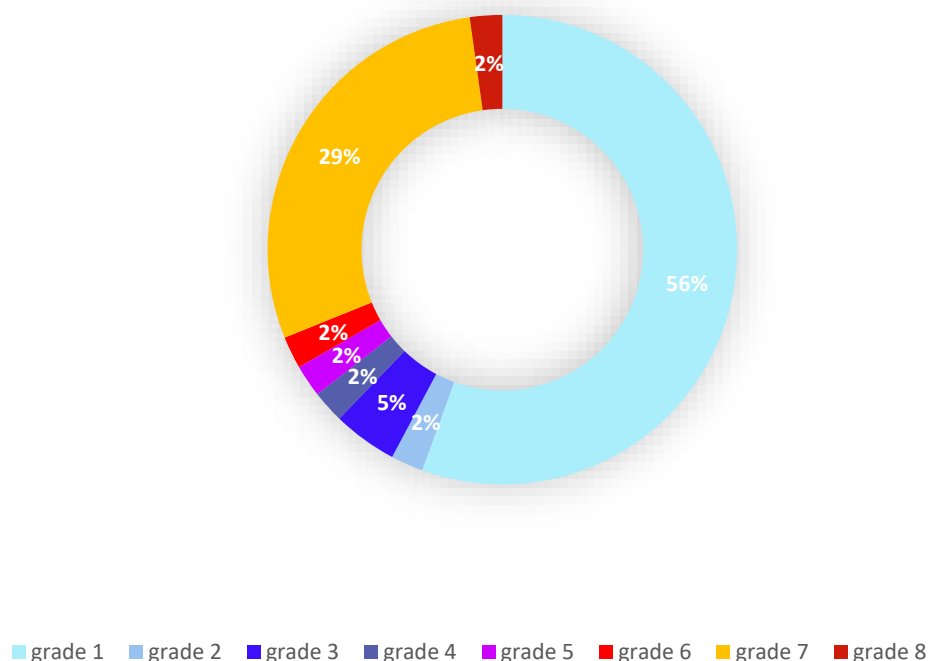


Figure 18



2021 in-store observations tell us that a Blokker store in Den Haag offered a range of Sinterklaas products that did not appear to also be available online, with images of sooty white Piets (grade 5, see Figure 19) and candies (grade 1). This was also the case in our 2020 data collection for Blokker.

Figure 19



Hema

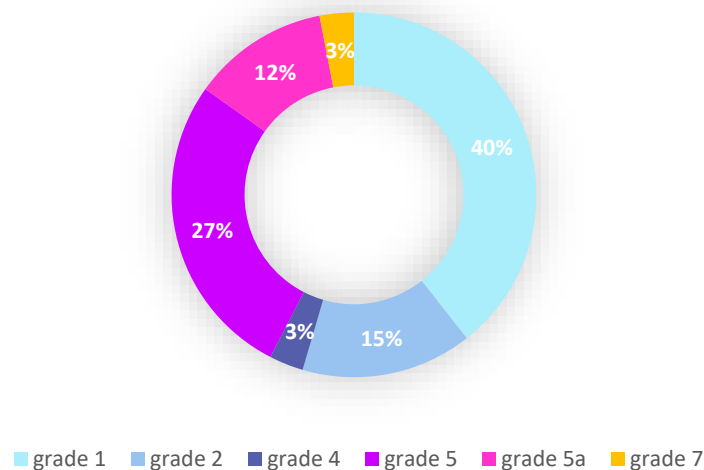
Hema sees a similar development as Plus has this year: a big increase (from 0 to 15,2%) in the share of grade 2 (and in this case also grade 4) at the expense of grade 1 (50% to 39,4%). Grade 2 presents itself at Hema in much of its decorations, where the letter P comes up again and again (Figure 20). We graded this grade 2, as it is still a reference to the Piet character, rather than not being present at all (grade 1). In this sense, this is also part of the “Sneaky Piet” phenomenon, described above.

Figure 20



Graph 7

Hema 2021



Where Hema differs from Plus, however, is in its traditionally large share of grades 5 and 5a. The sooty Piet defines the firm marketing identity of Hema, but loses some ground to grades 2 and 4 too this year (for grades 5 and 5a combined from 45,8% in 2020 to 39,4% in 2021). Hema is one of the stores that combines these two grades in its imagery more than previously as well. See the following example in Figure 21:

Figure 21



In-store observations confirm the strong Hema brand, featuring both grades 5 and 5a. See these examples of products observed in Hema stores in Amsterdam and Utrecht (see Figures 22 and 23).

Figure 22



Figure 23

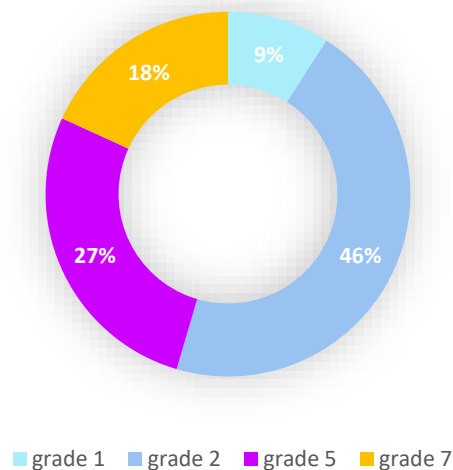


Kruidvat

As with Blokker, Kruidvat is not adhering to any trends set by the other stores this year, and is thus showing some noteworthy changes from last year. Having said this, it is important to note that in this case the total number of collected grades for Kruidvat was very low (11), as was the case last year (12), which means that small changes in numbers of grades translate to big relative shifts in shares. For instance, grade 1 last year consisted of two products and this year of one product, resulting in a shift in its share from 16,7% to 9,1%. Meanwhile, the reverse is true for grade 7; last year one product, this year two.

Graph 8

Kruidvat 2021



What does seem to be more in line with expectations is Kruidvat's continuing reliance on grade 2 (from 45,5% to 50%), which features heavily on their house branding of Sinterklaas confectionary products, such as kruidnoten. Its share (of grade 2 items) is somewhat lower this year, however, due to a clear change that can be seen in the increase of grade 5 products. The sooty white Piet is featured heavily on Kruidvat's costume products (see Figure 24), causing this share to jump from 8,3% to 27,3%. In-store observations show a lot more of these costumes available than were found online (Figure 25).

Figure 24



Figure 25



Ekoplaza

Ekoplaza has a 100% grade 1 score, like previous years. Also like previous years, we found very few products online (eight). Fieldwork in the past has shown that Sinterklaas products have been displayed in-store that were not available online and were differently graded (such as grade 3 labelling on certain items; Kerkmeijer et al., 2021). This year's in-store fieldwork shows more products too, though none of our data collectors observed anything other than grade 1 imagery and merchandise (see Figure 26).

Figure 26



Jamin

After last year, when one speculaaspop ruined a perfect score for Jamin, the candy store this year shows 100% grade 1 (based on online data), for the first time since we started this research. There were no in-person observations for Jamin this year to confirm this in-store, however. Jamin showed an immense range of chocolate letters in a variety of new flavours, including vegan crisp, gingerbread and even whiskey caramel! Its Sinterklaas banner on their website visually depicts some examples of this variety (see Figure 27).

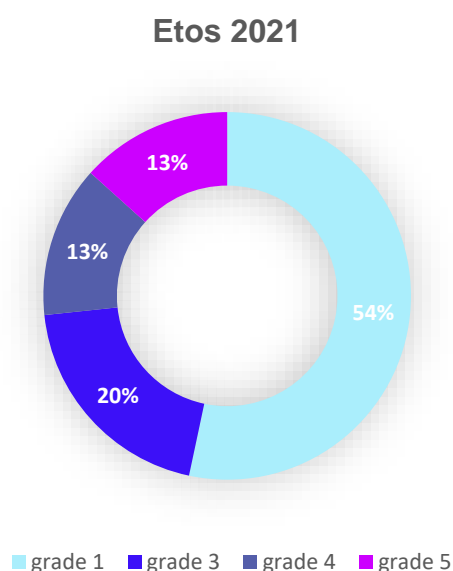
Figure 27



Etos

We witnessed the same issues at Etos as we noted at Kruidvat, regarding the number of products and relatively small changes having bigger consequences for the overall shares of grades, although it has to be said that the difference between the total number of Sinterklaas-specific products for Etos between last year and this year is bigger: from six to fifteen. We see a drop in the share for grade 1 here, too— though it is still applicable to a majority of Etos products—and a rise for grades 4 and 5.

Graph 9



Interestingly, we also see the emergence of grade 3 (from 0 to 20%). This is entirely due to the renewed selling of Piet costumes online, with a packaging featuring children WRA white in Piet costumes (see Figure 28), something we did not see at Etos last year online, but was present the years before. The rise in grade 4 comes from accessories, like hairclips, that featured various WRA Piets. Both Etos and Kruidvat then, see a significant change in their grades because of Piet costumes and accessory products for children. There were no in-store observations for Etos in late 2021.

Figure 28

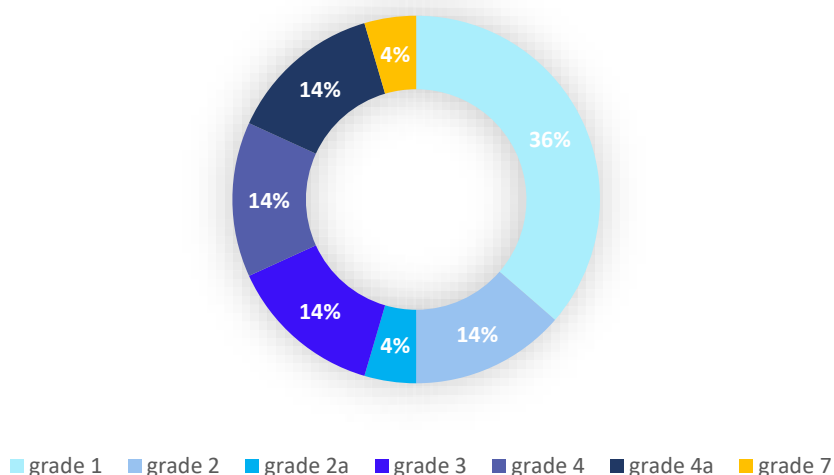


Xenos

Meanwhile, Xenos is right on trend this year, with an increase in its grade 1 share (from 31,3% to 36,4%), the emergence of grade 2 items (from 0 in 2020, to 13,6% in 2021) and grade 4 (0 to 13,6%), as well as a decline in grade 7 (18,7% to 4,5%).

Graph 10

Xenos 2021



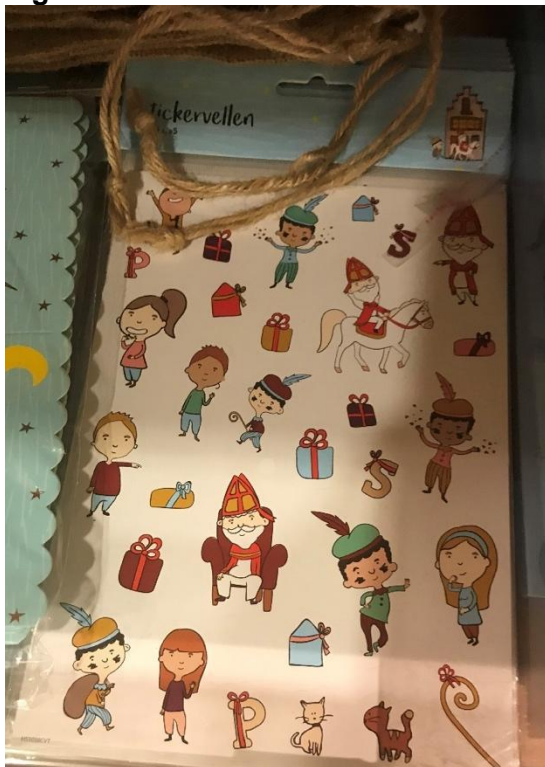
Most notably, however, is the apparent disappearance of Xenos' sooty grades 5 and 5a, which together accounted for 37,5% of the total number of grades in last year's report. This is a departure from the store's house-brand style observed last year, which was very much in line with the emergent sooty Piet (Dutch: Roetveeg Piet) narrative, that we observed both in-store (see Figure 30, p28) and online for Xenos in 2020. According to our online data collection, these grades are now replaced by grades 2 and grades 4 and 4a—i.e. Piets WRA various backgrounds, in addition to a Sint gendered as female in one case and a Sint WRA Black in another. The sheet of stickers below (Figure 29, p28) illustrates Xenos' new Sinterklaas house-brand style, which is the cause in this adjustment in grade share. Interestingly, we see the

most clear example yet of “Sneaky Piet” here too: a number of Piets are depicted hiding their faces behind musical instruments and an umbrella. In this way, analysing the variety of depictions this store offers, Xenos is able to remain somewhat non-committal in the ongoing tensions over who or what “Piet” should be.

Figure 29



Figure 30



Both Xenos styles show children WRA having various backgrounds, but there are two interesting differences: in the new style some (illustrated) children of colour are also dressed as Sint, while in the 2020 styles it is only illustrated white children depicted this way. Meanwhile, the new style also shows the “real” grown-up versions of the characters (also as illustrated cartoons), albeit grade 2 versions of the character. On the other hand, in-store observations have shown many products not available online, including some of the products in the 2020 house style, a wide variety of wrapping paper of different grades (see Figure 31) and also grade 5 Piet costumes for kids (see Figure 32).

Figure 31



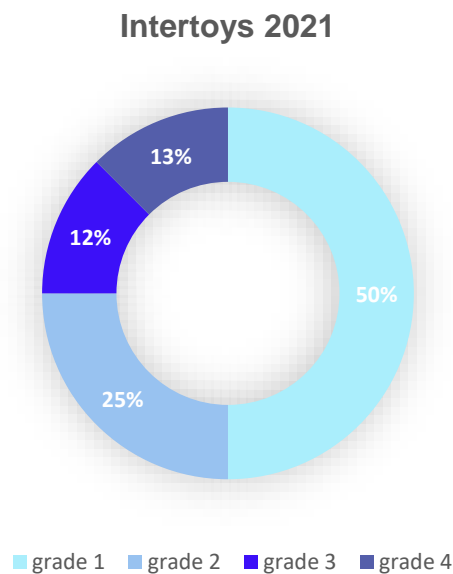
Figure 32



Intertoys

Intertoys shows a similar development to Plus and Hema: an increase in the share of grade 2 at the cost of grade 1. It needs to be mentioned that the toy store showed very few products online (eight, as was also the case last year). It is also noteworthy that all non-grade 1 products are either Piet costumes or show children in Piet costumes on the packaging. A potential reason for the lower number (and variety) of Sinterklaas-specific products is that all of Intertoys' items are relevant to customers for the festival, since any children's product can theoretically be given as a present, as long as it's delivered in Sinterklaas (and Piet) giftwrap. Therefore, it might be the case that stores like Intertoys do not necessarily have the same incentive as department stores, like Hema and Xenos, to develop a strong brand identity around key calendar moments like Sinterklaas; they simply have to sell the same item they sell all-year-round.

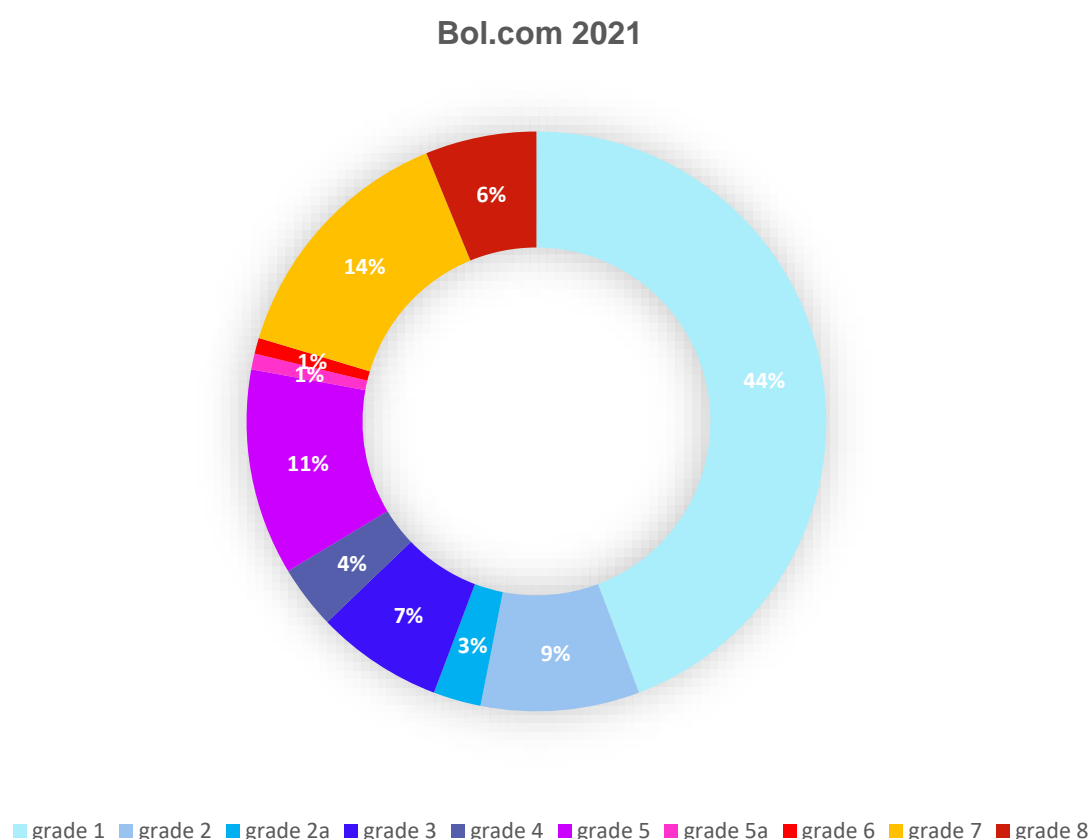
Graph 11



Bol.com

How did Bol.com do after publicly stating in 2020 they would ban blackface from their platform? We noted in 2021's report that this decision by the online marketplace had a definite impact on the presence of grade 8 products on their website, with that grade's share declining significantly (Kerkmeijer et al., 2021: p27). Nevertheless, did Bol manage to keep blackface from re-appearing, or even whittle its presence on their platform down further? Unfortunately, they did not. While the share of grade 1 for Bol.com is stable at 44%, it does see increases again in the shares of grade 7 (12,6% to 14,2%) and, importantly, of grade 8 (4,5% to 6,2%). While grades 5 and 5a together see a drop in their share, as well as in many other stores this year (from 18% to 12,4%), grade 2 does not increase, but drops from 11,7% to 8,8%. Grade 3, meanwhile, increases its share (from 2,7% to 7,1%).

Graph 12



The increase in share for grade 7 overall is mostly down to the costumes, toys and babies/toddlers categories. For all other categories, the grade 7 share either remains stable or declines (Graph 13). The story for grade 8 is more complex. The emergence of blackface masquerading as sooty Piets is found mostly on DVDs of current or relatively recent children's TV shows (see Figure 11). However, Bol.com sells DVDs of some older Sinterklaas-themed movies, too. The Bol.com product page for these movies also feature their trailers, which often show blackface (Figure 33).² Both occurrences come together to double the share of grade 8 in the DVD category: from 20% to 40%.

² For more on blackface and movies see last year's report.

Graph 13

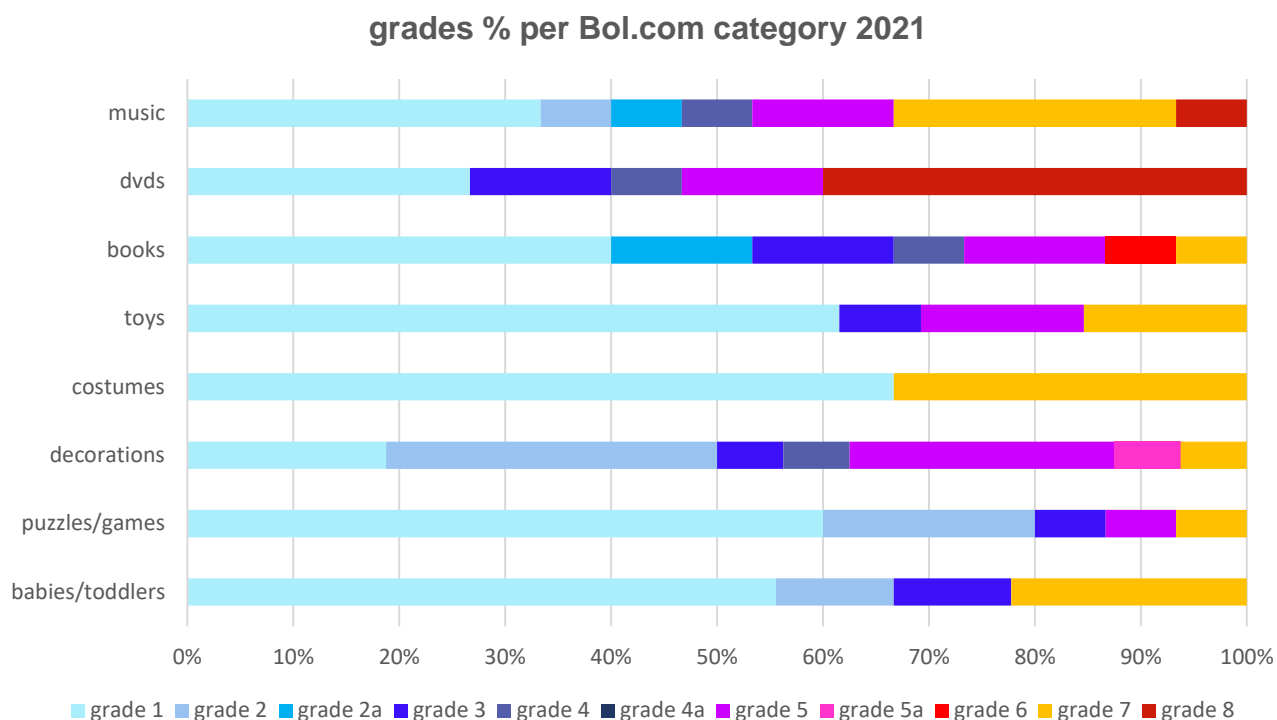


Figure 33

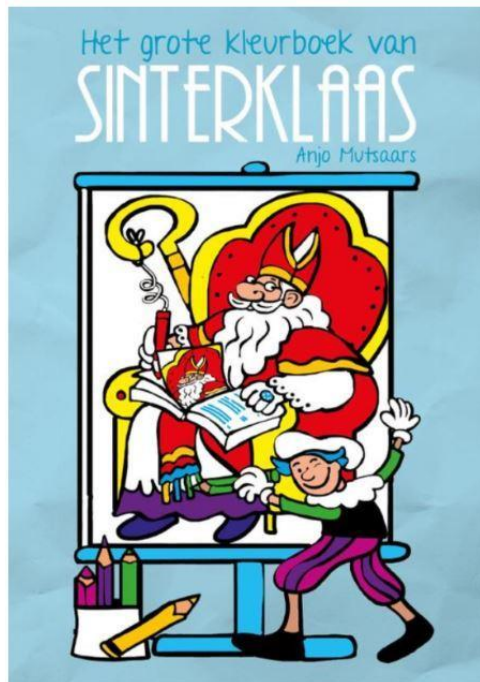


Peculiarly for Bol.com, the rise in grade 3 (white Piets) products seem to be mostly at the cost of grade 2. In the books, DVDs, decorations and babies/toddlers categories the grade 2 shares are either replaced or cut into by grade 3 (see, for an example Figure 34), making the platform almost solely responsible for the stability of grade 3 overall this year, while its share has been steadily declining both for Bol.com itself and overall at other stores since 2018 (see Graph 1).

Figure 34

Het grote kleurboek van Sinterklaas

Uitgever: BBNC Uitgevers | Taal: Nederlands | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Schrijf een review



Beyond the stores

It must be said that during our 2021 fieldwork round, we received observation notes showing that many Sinterklaas-themed displays do not contain any reference to Piets at all (grade 1), specifically in central Amsterdam. Nevertheless, smaller, non-chain stores traditionally show and sell a lot of products with grades 7 and 8 imagery, which is especially visible through their shop windows. Though this year (as in 2020) saw some limitations in access to stores due to Covid-19, our fieldworkers still came across a lot of this harmful imagery again. Bakeries are the usual suspects, as the grade 7 images below from bakeries in Arnhem (see Figure 35) and Harderwijk (Figure 36) show.

Figure 35



Figure 36



In Harderwijk too, a DJ-booth with grade 7 imagery was set up for the Sinterklaas parade (intoct) in the centre of town (Figure 37):

Figure 37



Meanwhile, grade 8 imagery was observed in a party supply store in Amsterdam (Figure 38), as well as in the window of a record store in Den Haag (Figure 39).

Figure 38



Figure 39



We witnessed some of the trends mentioned above outside of our regular stores, as well. Christmas was ever present in the run-up to the 5th of December, with some stores ignoring Sinterklaas completely and focusing on Christmas alone, like this Intratuin (gardening supplies, Figure 40) and Flying Tiger (miscellaneous gift shop, Figure 41), which were both observed in Utrecht.

Figure 40



Figure 41



Since Flying Tiger is originally a Danish store, it could be the case that they do not produce any items specifically for the (Dutch) Sinterklaas festival. The lack of decorations and/or products (at least being advertised) by Intratuin potentially points to how Sinterklaas is a festival to be enjoyed, in doors and at home rather than outside in public spaces or gardens. Aside from the infamous arrival parades, that is.

The extreme choice in confectionery products available was also seen in the Odin whole foods store in Amsterdam (see Figure 42), as well as in an Action store in Utrecht (see Figure 43).

Figure 42



Figure 43



Finally, in the Bijenkorf (a chain of luxury department stores) in Amsterdam, a fieldworker observed their traditional climbing Piets—i.e. automated puppets going up and down throughout the store on a rope suspended from the ceiling. Until 2015 these used to be grade 7 puppets, with brown faces and exaggerated “African” features (RTL Nieuws, 2015). They have since been modified to be wearing silvery, metallic masks. It’s entirely possible that the masks are hiding features that we would assess at grade 7. In short, a somewhat failed attempt at the “Sneaky Piet”.

Figure 44



Conclusions

It is true that our 2021-22 results show the continued growth of grade 1 products and that grades 7 and 8 continue to shrink. The continuance of these trends in our longitudinal research are salient and offer important insights for what the future might hold for Sinterklaas merchandise. Nonetheless, since our third report (Parnell-Berry et al., 2018), we have also asserted that the key grades to observe would be those in the middle (2 to 6), which have surprised us in a number of ways over the years. 2021 data collection revealed the introduction of more *brownface* usage (instead of pitch black makeup), underneath soot marks. Historically, we have graded Piet characters with soot marks as 5 or 5b. However, because of the use of brown face-paint on white actors in a number of cases—for example to give the Piets a “Spanish” tan in *De Staff van Sinterklaas* (AD, 2021)—we felt these depictions eventually had very much the same affect as blackface would. Therefore, such products were ultimately graded 8 by us. Indeed, the enlarged red lips might be gone, but as our data analysis above shows, afro hair styles are still in use alongside a deliberate darkening of the skin of Piet characters as a way to distinguish them. We see this most often when real people depict the character for series and films, where they literally bring Piet to life as a non-white person, reminding us of the necessity inherent within the mainstream Sinterklaas narrative for the Piet character to be racialised as non-white, especially when juxtaposed with the white Sinterklaas. There will be those who try to deny that these depictions are really Zwarte Piet, because of the soot marks also used on top of the brown makeup—for instance, as Jerry Afriyie of Kick Out Zwarte Piet does when endorsing *De Staff* (ibid). Nonetheless, combining brownface with sooty marks only strengthens our initial argument that the chimney narrative is being used as a smokescreen to an intentional maintenance of racial mimicry, mockery and dominance. This is perhaps the most demonstrable example of the two key conclusions offered in this year’s report:

1. Brands are not invested in making truly progressive stances;
2. Brands refuse to be more accountable to their role in shaping white supremacist Sinterklaas narratives.

As we embarked on the online data collection part of our research in November 2021, we were initially hampered by the discovery of “hidden Piets”—i.e. Piet-related Sinterklaas products that do not actually come up on shop websites when using the search term “Sinterklaas”. Once we modified our searching techniques accordingly, we were able to access more items than in each of the previous two years of the study. Indeed, while it was known that Piet remained an integral element of the Sinterklaas festival, with Piet costumes for children being popular at stores such as Kruidvat, Intertoys and Etos, it was interesting to observe stores attempting to find a way to put some sort of distance between Piet-related items and the rest of their Sinterklaas catalogs. Additionally, we have witnessed year-on-year growth of grade 2 (“Sneaky Piet”) products and advertisements as an increasing number of brands choose to reference the Piet character in obscure ways. For example, illustrated Piets were observed literally hiding their faces behind other objects in a picture or poster (e.g. at Xenos), or only shown as a shadow or silhouette (e.g. on chocolate letters by Verkade and Tony’s Chokoloney). We view both actions on the part of stores and brands to be a form of evasion from taking a clear stance in the ongoing debate around how to ultimately deal with Zwarte Piet.

In the first instance, the hiding of a Piet from a standard “Sinterklaas” search means that at first glance, it might seem as though a specific store only sells grade 1 items for the Sinterklaas season. On one hand, shoppers who do not wish to even see a Piet-related product will be saved the hassle, while on the other, customers who really want Piet-specific items have to take the extra step of looking further for them. This might be interpreted as quite progressive by certain spectators, but the fact remains that those Piet products are still available—despite so much diversity in and availability of Sinterklaas items that don’t reference the Piet character at all. This shows us how, by and large, there is the sense by certain brands that the Sinterklaas

festival is not complete without Piet. Moreover, in the second instance where a vague reference is made to the Piet character (grade 2 items) brands are able to avoid showing the Piet's face; they don't have to choose whether or not to abandon blackface, or which of the various new narratives to follow. Additionally, brands are building on the historical excuse that (Zwarte) Piet should be unrecognisable and almost mythical, and therefore giving him a clear identity goes against the whole point of the character. This is the reason Dutch people gave in defence of using blackface and racial mimicry for decades (Driessen, 2021), and it relates to another one of our grades. The excuses around recognisability are reflected also in the emergence and maintenance of the sooty Piet trend (grades 5 and 5a), where brands and store stand behind the lie that Zwarte Piet was black because of soot—making it true by giving the new versions of the character soot marks. We have discussed this in previous reports (Kerkmeijer et al., 2021), taking note of the willingness for brands to grasp at commercial options that remove any real accountability from their doorsteps. When looked at from this point of view, it is difficult to contend that these current commercial developments illustrate genuine cultural progression is being made around the evolution of Zwarte Piet.

It is not enough that we see people of increasingly diverse (perceived) ethnic backgrounds and genders playing the roles of both Sinterklaas and Piet, as well as interacting with and/or using festival products. These commercial and ad-based efforts are worthless when, at its heart, a brand holds onto the old racialised myths associated with the festival. The so-called new trend of the sooty Piet—that we witnessed as early as 2016, and believed would redirect the narrative—is already been squeezed out in just a short few years by the emerging grade 2 and (brownface) grade 8 (albeit to a lesser extent) phenomena we observe above. In other words, in half a decade, brands have started to abandon a potentially fresh (albeit problematic) new Sinterklaas discourse, in order to find a way back to include Zwarte Piet again. This is despite EénVandaag's annual poll on Sinterklaas showing in 2021 that the public are generally more in favour of a sooty Piet than the traditional Zwarte Piet (Klapwijk, 2021). It is not the case that it is impossible to update the festival and its characters: one only needs to consider the facetious manner in which Santa Claus is now included in Sinterklaas storylines as Christmas becomes more important to Dutch households and brands alike during the same time of year. To make more concrete conclusions around this particular development, we should conduct more robust research on this in the future, although it is still arguable that comparatively the decisions made on Zwarte Piet depictions show us how much of this is a very self-aware choice.

As the political centre continues its gradual migration further to the right, it could be there is less widespread support for anti-racist causes, which are largely associated with the (far) left. There have been numerous signs of a decrease in commitment to social justice movements, with outright fatigue expressed towards Black Lives Matter only two years after the movement appeared to be embraced and accelerated globally. Furthermore, a highly politicised criminalisation of Critical Race Theory at various educational levels throughout Europe and the US indicates a withdrawal of tolerance for discourses that not only call out white supremacy, but aim to dismantle it as well. These are but two reminders that there is very little urgency from established and conservative institutions to live up to the call of the UN People of African Descent decade, which will soon come to a close.

Therefore, it was perhaps only a matter of time before the pressures on Dutch culture to face its own legacies of anti-Black racism and colonialism burned out. Notably, EénVandaag's data indicates that support to completely remove Piet from the Sinterklaas festival is waning (ibid). As we all emerge from the Covid-19 cloud, and on the street demonstrations can once again confront racist Sinterklaas parades, which will no doubt resume en masse now that large gatherings are no longer deemed a threat to public health, we will remain close observers of the impact anti-Piet campaigners will have on shaping the Sinterklaas narrative. Historically, it has been the case that anti-Piet protests were largely unsuccessful, even after decades of campaigning (Völke, 2020). All the same, it is difficult to believe we'll backslide to where we

were a little over 10 years ago. So much has changed since Quinsy Gario first wore his homemade *Zwarte Piet is Racisme* t-shirt to a poetry event in June 2011, due to the courage and efforts of so many, reaching so much further than Sinterklaas in terms of healing deep and serious social problems. We owe it to each other to stand firm.

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Appendix C: glossary of Sinterklaas-specific terms

Chocoladeletter

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.

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.