

BLACK AS SOOT

**The convictions and perspectives of
Zwarte Piet supporters within the racism debate**

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Introduction

Every year around the month October, November, most children minds slowly focus on the inevitable arrival of a very special person: Sinterklaas. This friendly old and charismatic bishop visits the Netherlands from his castle in Spain via his steamboat to bring happiness, sweets and presents to all children. Fortunately he is not alone in this monumental task; for he is accompanied with his trusty white horse to ride the Dutch rooftops as well as his loyal helpers, the cheerful and colorful Zwarte Pieten. The arrival of this saint is heralded and celebrated with various parades and festivities for the children. So much so that nobody can really escape the fact: Sinterklaas is back!

However, this tradition is overshadowed by an increasingly hostile debate whether the Zwarte Pieten (whose skin are painted dark) are racist stereotypes linked with colonial sentiments and slavery. Both parties clash on an annual basis, each standing firmly behind their convictions until it dies down after Sinterklaas leaves the country. However, in the previous year the situation was significantly different. The debate reached an entirely different level as opponents started to enforce the abolishment of Zwarte Piet through the judicial system. Even the United Nations issued an investigation on the alleged racist tradition that was deemed to be in violation of human rights and international treaties. This resulted in the escalation of the debate and created an unusual intense and polarized tension within the Netherlands that still resonates during the time this thesis is written.

This study specifically focusses on the supporters of Zwarte Piet and how they frame their convictions in the light of the racism charges as expressed by the opponents. It also asks the question whether defending Zwarte Piet can be construed as an act of racism. The author is aware of the sensitivity of this subject and thus has aimed in his scientific approach to adopt a neutral stance regarding the figure of Zwarte Piet itself and also gives no value judgment towards its supporters. The ultimate goal is to achieve a better understanding of the dynamics of the Zwarte Piet debate and of racism denial within this particular contextual setting through the use of qualitative research. It is the hope of the author is that this study will be the first of many steps that will be undertaken to elevate this debate to the next level and hopefully will be of use to mediate the current stalemate.

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1. Theoretical framework

1.1 Zwarte Piet: servant or friend?

Even though the focus of this paper are the underlying motivations as to why supporters do not find Zwarte Piet racist and how this affects the defense of the supporters within the context of the debate, it is important to look at the figure of Zwarte Piet itself. This is main reason for this is because Zwarte Piet is considered to be an important aspect of Dutch culture and in extension of Dutch identity. Ignoring the history and development of both Zwarte Piet and the rather sporadic resistance against this traditional figure would severely limit the contextual scope in which the debates takes place and the representation of the socio-cultural perspectives involved.

Again, this paper does not judge whether the figure of Zwarte Piet is racist, neither does it condone or support the initiatives that want to abolish or alter the tradition. It has been the intention of the author to present a perspective that is as neutral as possible. This is why terms such as ‘racism denial’ should not be interpreted as an accusation from the researcher towards the supporters of Zwarte Piet about the nature of their beliefs (i.e. Zwarte Piet is a racist figure, thus they are racists but they are just denying it), but as a construct that helps to explore the various aspects that are related to the subject and context of the discourse, since the fact remains that one group claims one to be racist whilst the other firmly denies it.

1.1.1 *Even though I am black as soot, I do mean well.* ^[1]

Despite the popularity among children and love many adults continue to have for Zwarte Piet (around 92 percent of the Dutch inhabitants are supportive; Margry, 2014), the exact details surrounding the origin of this character are not clear and many theories have been suggested by scholars and celebrators alike. Henk van Benthem argued that the Saracens as described in the ‘Ivanhoe’ novel by Walter Scott (1820) was the inspiration for Jan Schenkman to create the character in his book ‘Sinterklaas en zijn knecht’ (translation: ‘Sinterklaas and his servant’) that appeared in 1850, the oldest official reference to Zwarte Piet to date, even though there is circumstantial evidence that the character was used during the celebrations around 1828 (Helsloot, 2012a; Helsloot, 2011). The name ‘Zwarte Piet’ was also subject of great regional variation until circa 1950 (Helsloot, 2011). It is interesting to note that Sinterklaas in other European countries usually has devilish companions with him and that previous versions of Zwarte Piet were also described as being terrifying figures. These figures were meant to scare the children, coercing them into or maintaining their good behavior, however, the true origin of Zwarte Piet is far from clear (Booy, 2008).

There are various other explanations circulating; such as that Zwarte Piet is not based on African people but is his own species, are actually freed Moors or is based on mythological figures such as the ravens of the Germanic god Wodan. More practical arguments are also given, such as soot of the chimneys causing the blackness of Zwarte Piet (Booy, 2008; Helsloot, 2005; Helsloot, 2012b;

Helsloot, personal communication). These are however in conflict with stereotypical depictions that circulated in the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. The oriental clothing, the curly hair, emphasized red lips and earrings leave little room for further interpretation; Zwarte Piet indeed represented a black person and not some sort of archetype (Helsloot, 2012a). However, this is not always how it is perceived by those who celebrate Sinterklaas. They see it as a highly valued tradition, something that defines Dutch culture and the fact that it is a children's party also seems to make it innocent in nature (Helsloot, 2012b). Supporters of Zwarte Piet seem to be determined to prevent this 'friend of all children' to be contaminated with accusations of racism or used to confront them with the uncomfortable colonial past of the Netherlands.

John Helsloot (2012b) used the concept of 'cultural aphasia' to shed more light on this curious phenomenon. He based his concept on the writings of Ann Laura Stoler who stated that aphasia affects the ability of one to recognize objects and label them correctly. This would especially be the case when confronted with the colonial pasts of Western countries. In the case of Zwarte Piet, this has resulted in the collective separation of the colonial values and stereotypical associations from the figure of Zwarte Piet and the subsequent replacement with other values, as described above. This kind of disconnection between labels and objects is the result of "the interplay of power relations defining what is socially accepted as 'true' (Helsloot, 2012b, p. 2)." Any criticisms or objections that challenge this 'hegemonic régime of truth' will be either ignored or stopped altogether. A complicating factor is the fact that the carnivalesque character of Zwarte Piet and the symbolic representation of 'otherness' and comic relief has made Zwarte Piet a 'biografied folklore': a unilateral and fixed interpretation of history that is construed as positive, optimistic and free of contradictions or conflict. Those who do not agree with this point of view are perceived as outsiders.

This might explain the sheer intensity of resistance the supporters display against opponents of Zwarte Piet; criticism against Zwarte Piet is equated as criticism with being Dutch or as personal critique. In other words, Zwarte Piet has become such an intricate part of the personal identity or national identity (e.g. the only thing that is still 'truly Dutch') of those that enjoy celebrating the tradition, that any negative comment towards Zwarte Piet is perceived an assault towards the person in question (e.g. why am I branded as a racist for liking a harmless tradition?) or even an attack on the Dutch themselves (e.g. this is our tradition, one should respect it).

1.1.2 A history of debate

Wherein the Americans abolished Zwarte Piet altogether and placed Sinterklaas (now more commonly known as Santa Claus) at the center of attention, the Dutch themselves seem reluctant to let the tradition go. Even though it is clear that the black emancipation movement in America during the 1960's has inspired the discussion about the correctness of the helpful servant, especially among Dutch citizens of Surinam and Antillean origin, the majority of the Dutch still welcome Zwarte Piet with enthusiasm and joy (Helsloot, 2007). To describe the entire history of protest against Zwarte Piet

would require a thesis or a book of its own entirely. That is why only several events will be highlighted as a backdrop for the rest of the thesis with the discussion of 2013 as the main catalyst for this specific thesis.

John Helsloot (2005) offers a clear overview of the ‘battle for Zwarte Piet’ and effectively sketches a development in which the intensity of protest is influenced by a number of societal developments: Due to the limited number of Surinamese or Antilleans living in the Netherlands, protest against Zwarte Piet was initiated by ‘white’ Dutchmen in the 60’s and 70’s. Even though there was previously always some uneasiness among the Surinamese and Antillean population during the time of Sinterklaas, it was only at that time that the relationship between Sinterklaas and Zwarte Piet was openly questioned and alternatives were suggested. Even though it did not lead to the abolishment of Zwarte Piet, it did however change the role of Sinterklaas and Zwarte Piet. Changing pedagogical perspectives resulted in a less stern attitude from both figures and children were no longer physically punished. More importantly, Zwarte Piet had to speak Dutch fluently unlike before, when limited proficiency with a foreign (mostly Surinamese) accent was accepted.

Protests against Zwarte Piet remained incidental until the 80’s wherein the awareness of the Surinamese community about their own ethnic identity grew along with frustrations about Zwarte Piet. Helsloot (2005) connects these developments with the fact that the Sinterklaas festivities were outlawed after the coup of Bouterse in Surinam since it was a reminder of colonialism. The alternative of ‘Children’s Day’ that was being held on December 5th was not successful and Sinterklaas was reinstated in Surinam in the ‘90’s. One of the earliest signs of protest from the Surinamese population occurred in 1981 with the action ‘Sinterklaas zonder Zwarte Piet’ (translation: “Sinterklaas without Zwarte Piet”), that urged to remove the character from the festival. Protests from similar movements would continue via leaflets and initiatives wherein they also appealed to the fact that the celebration has changed over the years so there would be no objection to do so again. Initiatives were mostly on a small scale, in particular in neighborhoods or schools.

This however changed in the ‘90’s with the implementation of so-called ‘Bonte Pieten’ (i.e. people painted in various colors such as red, blue, yellow, etc.) that walked alongside regular Zwarte Pieten in the parade of Amsterdam in 1993. The effect however was limited and opponents still argued that it continued to be a white person dominating people with dark colored skin. Plans to only include these Bonte Pieten were severely criticized. Like-minded projects yielded variable results; some schools made it explicit that Zwarte Piet was no slave, that they were equal to Sinterklaas, but that a hierarchy maintained since hierarchies are also present in everyday life. Other schools made slight changes such as omitting songs or phrases that could be interpreted as hurtful for both children and their parents or altered the relationship so that Sinterklaas was also prone to silly or clumsy mistakes. However, the scale of these changes remained limited.

In his description of above-mentioned history Helsloot (2005) notes that it is unusual that in the protests of ‘black’ Dutchmen, it is never mentioned that the Zwarte Pieten are ‘white’ Dutchmen

impersonating dark colored people. Another aspect that stood out for him was the fact that there were little alternative celebrations proposed by the involved parties, for instance Kwanzaa in the United States as an alternative for Christmas.

1.1.3 *The year of the 'Pietitie'*

The discussion of 2013 can be traced back to October the 7th, when the artist Quincy Gario, who was arrested for demonstrating against Zwarte Piet two years prior, was one of the table guests in the famous Dutch talk show Paul & Witteman. He had issued a complaint against the Dutch government at the European Court of Human Rights for organizing the Sinterklaas parade in Amsterdam. According to Gario, the Sinterklaas tradition was an annual play that glorified the colonial history and in extension slavery: "It's as if we want to return to a period in which I would be made a slave and propertied to one of you", Gario proclaimed during the interview (cited in Sp!ts of December 20th, 2013). His plea fell on deaf ears and was quickly brushed aside as a matter of interpretation.

That the supporters of Zwarte Piet continued to be defiant against these arguments was clear when one looks at the debates that were simultaneously held on social media during the broadcast. Even though it would be unfair to say that this is a representative picture of existing attitudes and mindsets of the Dutch regarding this subject, the aggressive atmosphere of the discourse and ironic racist remarks that dominated the social media channels made an impact even though it was publically framed as an exception and removed from the Sinterklaas celebration (Balkenhol, 2013).

This however changed when it became clear that the United Nations (UN) were conducting a study about the racist nature of the Sinterklaas celebration on the basis of received complaints. The letter that the Prime minister received from the UN stated:

"According to the information received: The character and image of Black Pete perpetuate a stereotyped image of African people and people of African descent as second-class citizens, fostering an underlying sense of inferiority within Dutch society and stirring racial differences as well as racism. (...) Reportedly, a growing opposition by people of non-African origins is to be noticed. However, it is also alleged that no response has been given to associations defending the rights of African people and people of African descent in the Netherlands, which are asking for dialogue."

The final two sentences are interesting ones, since they acknowledge the growing resistance against Zwarte Piet by 'white' Dutchmen as described in the previous paragraph. It is also striking that the letter mentions 'black' Dutchmen are trying to initiate a dialogue instead of demanding it to be abolished straight away. As this letter also mentions and the rest of this chapter will show, starting a

discussion about this subject is not an easy feat. One must also keep in mind that the Netherlands has tried several times in the past to protect the Sinterklaas tradition by sending applications to the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage.

According to Margry (2014) there is an apparent paradox within the UNESCO-treaty. Intangible heritage is dynamic (something that is clear when one looks at the continuing development of the Sinterklaas celebration and the relations between the personas therein), however, by encapsulating the tradition, it will turn static (canonized) and more uniform across regions in the Netherlands. This is something that is seen in Belgium, where the tradition has been included in the national cultural inventory and where people can also participate in a nationally organized basic course about how Sinterklaas and Zwarte Piet should behave (Margry, 2014, p. 64). Margry also mentions that any changes in the character of Zwarte Piet should come from (local) initiatives, not from the national government or cultural institutions. This is something that has become increasingly difficult after the ‘Piet-revolution’ and ‘Pietitie’ of 2013. The UN letter also mentions these application attempts with interesting additional information:

“(…) [N]o inscription on UNESCO lists relating to cultural heritage or national lists or registers should be requested or granted without the free, prior and informed consent of the concerned communities. The Special rapporteur further stressed that some practices, which are part of cultural heritage may infringe upon human rights. International instruments clearly state that practices contrary to human rights cannot be justified with a plea for the preservation / safeguard of cultural heritage, cultural diversity or cultural rights.”

This again reveals interesting points regarding the subject of Zwarte Piet. The fact that some members of communities present in the Netherlands are objecting against a certain element in the tradition is an infringement of human rights, namely the right to take part, have access to and enjoyment of cultural heritage (UN letter, 2013). This discrepancy shows the tension between protecting intangible cultural heritage from vanishing and the ethics concerning the perceived offensive qualities of the tradition from some groups of society. This has resulted in the decision to turn down the international protection for the Sinterklaas celebrations by UNESCO. In order to validate or reject the information they received, the letter ends with a request to the Prime Minister and asks related questions to acquire more information about the celebrations itself and the role of the government in their efforts to alleviate the concerns of the groups that have filed complaints.

However, the fact that an outside party is now actively involved with the discussion (aside

from the occasional comments of the United States), caused quite a stir. This was certainly the case when one of the head researchers that were assigned to this project, Verene Shepard, was interviewed by a Dutch news show called EenVandaag (October 22, 2013; http://www.eenvandaag.nl/binnenland/47551/_zwarte_piet_terugkeer_naar_slavernij_en_moet_stoppen_). In the interview she pleaded for the abolishment of the tradition entirely, prior to the start of the investigation. This fact made the supporters of Zwarte Piet question the neutrality and validity of the research and resulted in a storm of protest from the supporters. Counter initiatives were organized that ranged from protest marches; one of the most famous being that opponents would turn their backs against Sinterklaas as he passed. This was mainly a silent protest so as not to upset the children and the overall peaceful atmosphere. In contrast, there was also a demonstration that was being held by supporters of Zwarte Piet and was co-founded by the controversial political party, Party for Freedom (PVV).

One of the more noteworthy initiatives was a Facebook page in which the founders wanted to give voice to those who wanted to keep Zwarte Piet, called ‘Pietitie’; this is a play and combination of the words ‘Piet’ and ‘petitie’, the Dutch word for petition. The page reached two million ‘Likes’ within two days and the ‘Likes’ were symbolically handed to the chairwoman of the Tweede Kamer, showing to the government that there was still a large number of people determined to preserve Zwarte Piet in the Sinterklaas tradition (Sp!ts, 2013; Kamp, 2013). The page became so well-known and engrained in this year’s discussion that it was a contestant for ‘word of the year’ as annually issued by Genootschap Onze Taal (Onze Taal, 2013). Due to its success, the founders of the initiative have announced to come back stronger next year as a foundation that aims to provide poor children a pleasant Sinterklaas celebration (BN/De Stem, 2013).

1.2 “I am not racist, but...”: racism denial

Before one can discuss racism denial, one needs to have a definition of what racism actually is. This is a very complex issue since one deals with a multidimensional phenomenon that is influenced by many societal and individual factors and the fact that it is interrelated with other controversial topics such as sexism and nationalism makes defining racism not a simple task and can present academic challenges (Miles & Brown, 2003; Petrova, 2000). In this light, it might be worth mentioning that the use of the word ‘racism’ itself is not that old. It was first used to refer to the practices of the Nazi regime in during the Second World War. Before that, there was no specific terminology that was used to describe this concept (Miles & Brown, 2003; Bleach, 2005). Since it is a topic that could easily be a thesis on its own, this paragraph will only focus on the core aspects that are relevant for this study.

1.2.1 *More than skin color*

In their attempt to define racism, Miles & Brown (2003) warn about the dangers of analytically inflating or deflating this concept. Inflating entails that one expands the definition of racism, until the point is reached that virtually everything that is considered offensive can be categorized as racism.

This devaluates the concept entirely since it does not differentiate between different ways in which one can insult and thus accusations of racism will lose their persuasive power. Deflating is the exact opposite; one narrows the definition down until it only envelops one or a couple of aspects of racism, for example that it only concerns discrimination and oppression from white people towards black people. This also presents difficulties since it ignores the wide variety in which racism can manifest itself, but more importantly, it will be easier to ignore complaints or deny reports about racism from those who are affected by it.

According to Miles and Brown (2003) it is important to consider the following when one deals with racism: Even though the claim of a biological or genetic hierarchy of human races is considered to be false by the scientific community, race is still frequently used in various discourse arenas such as politics. In these cases it is a social construct in which people are differentiated both by phenotypical (i.e. physical appearance) and cultural characteristics. Race is also a construct that has bilateral influence; if one race is evaluated to possess unwanted or inferior characteristics, then the race that makes this claim (e.g. the majority or with the one with most political power) will be elevated and deemed superior. In this light, it is important to realize that racism and its manifestations differ in each region of the world and are intrinsically connected with historical and cultural convictions.

The same is the case with ethnicity, a concept that is interwoven with racism, since it is the result of a “relational context in which members of these groups identify themselves as being culturally distinctive (Miles & Brown, 2003; p. 96).” When an individual is categorized on the basis of socio-cultural features, one speaks of ethnicization. This is a process in which one formats and reconstructs society in groups and culturally differentiates between them. Economic motivations such as redefining the labor market are often used, but the cultural aspects are more salient since this explicates the differences between minorities and the majority (Miles & Brown, 2003). When an individual is categorized similarly, but on the basis of biological or somatic features (e.g. skin color), whether they are real or imaginative, Miles and Brown (2003) speak of racialization. This process is used to define the Other, but also to define the Self which is in turn politically influenced (e.g. the genetic superiority of the Germanic race as propagated by the Nazi regime).

In the end, Miles and Brown (2003) give a narrow definition of racism, arguing that it is of ‘serious analytical value’ when defined as an ideology in which somatic features of socially constructed groups are negatively or positively evaluated. Racism is also “an integral component of a wider historical process of racialization that is interlinked with exclusionary practices and with the expression of other forms of exclusionary ideology (p. 113).” A final aspect of racism that needs to be addressed is that it is a fluid concept that is not necessarily straight-forward: “(...) [I]deas and arguments derived from imperialist history are continually reworked and given new meanings as a result of contemporary endogenous political-economic forces, and combined with new ideas and images (p. 62).” It is this definition that will be the theoretical guideline for the remainder of the thesis and upon which the experiences and perspectives of the participants of this study will be compared

with. Whether racism is apparent or hiding under the surface of discourse, the fact remains that it is a topic that evokes strong, negative emotions, from both the victims as well as those that are confronted with accusations of racism.

1.2.2 New racism, or still the same?

When one is studying the phenomenon of racism, one will inevitably encounter the term ‘new racism’. Scholars who explore this concept argue that contemporary racism is less explicit and more refined in formal (i.e. political) discourse, for instance by focusing on cultural differences that are deemed to be incompatible with the dominant culture or are associated with the rise of new nationalistic movements (Babacan, 2008). This would be a stark contrast to ‘old racism’ that is considered to be publically accepted at the time, for instance during the Apartheid in South Africa or during the segregation policies within the United States, wherein phenotypical features were prominent and racism had a clear genetic (pseudo-scientific) basis (Leach, 2005; Miles & Brown, 2003; Babacan, 2008).

Even though ‘new racism’ is largely accepted by the scientific community (Leach, 2005), it is still the question if racism has really changed that much. Leach (2005) analyzed works that described outcomes of various inquiries conducted before the ‘70’s in America and Australia, and it became clear that “the formal expression of ‘old-fashioned racism’ was not necessarily overt, direct and blatant. Even where segregation was a popular practice, there was great variation in its formal expression (p. 435).” This means that during this time period, there was also hesitance to relate the discriminatory practices directly to racism. Riggs & Due (2010) argue that ‘modern’ racism and ‘traditional’ racism can be regarded to be more or less the same since “they both function to maintain social hierarchies, and they both have very real effects in the lives of all groups of people (p. 259).”

This however does not mean that racial inferiority has been disregarded by certain political movements or the public. In fact, according to Bleach (2005) it is influenced by the support and opposition of various social policies such as the illegal return of immigrants that is implemented in several European counties including the Netherlands. This has led him to conclude that the notion of racial inferiority is still “active and consequential in contemporary societies (p. 438).”

1.2.3 Racism is not here, but there

That racism is indeed a sensitive issue and that the word itself is charged with negative connotations is clear when one reads about the work of Philomena Essed (2004). She was confronted with a wave of criticism and hostility from both citizens and academics alike after publishing a book and its spiritual continuation that challenged “the myth of Dutch non-racism (p. 119)”. The hesitance or taboo that surrounded the usage of the word ‘racism’ in different kinds of public discourse or the fact that racism had no prominent place in Dutch research agendas was not limited to the Netherlands, and it was also a sign that the representation of racism is influenced by various social and political forces.

According to Babacan (2008) discourse about racism is defined by contradictions. One of particular importance are the governments that are developing policies and legislation against racism, but at the same time denies its existence. According to him “[C]riticism of racism is often couched in soft language, equating it in with (negative) community relations or the need for harmony (para. 2).” One of the reasons for this is that politicians are afraid that it might negatively affect their political campaigns. The consequence of this is that fundamental issues concerning discrimination cannot be addressed or restricted by law. As a result, the government will not be as motivated to create an environment in which cultural diversity can be safely practiced. More crucially, instances of racism will be downplayed or described as cases of misunderstandings. The ‘condemnation’ of racism in law, academia and in various socio-cultural contexts has caused that, even among those that can be classified as racist both in ideology and behavior, racism will be denied (Petrova, 2000).

Dei (1999) expresses his concerns towards the ‘color-blind approach’ within the educational system wherein “[e]ducators, parents and decision-makers shy away from discussing race either for fear of offending individuals and groups or in a concealed attempt to deny race privilege (p. 18).” According to Dei, this kind of denial has detrimental effects on the social and cultural identities and self-esteem of the students since “race is a fundamental principle in social organization and social relations in Euro-American contexts. Race is a salient marker of social position and status (p. 19).” The denial of race would ultimately lead to the reinforcement of “the mistrust that many racially minoritised youth have of the dominant institutions (e.g. schools, courts and media). (p. 33)” These concerns are confirmed by Richeson and Nussbaum (2004), who, on the basis of literature study and their own, conclude that color-blindness (or decategorization) of a student population will result in a greater degree of automatic racial bias (i.e. pro-white) than when they are exposed to a multicultural oriented environment. They also conclude that these racial attitudes are not static; they are influenced by the context and approach one has taken to achieve interethnic harmony.

Petrova (2000) puts it more bluntly; she claims that every society is racist to some degree but that it is not always visible within social behavior since “the existence of racism is widely denied across cultures, with varying degrees of disguise (para. 1)”. She states that the concept of race is deeply rooted in everyday language and perceptions, even when they are neutrally formulated. At the same time, she argues that there are various degrees in which one can be aware of racism; from explicit awareness to routinized behavior. The last degree refers to the fact that dominant paradigms concerning relations between various groups in society are not always consciously experienced by members of the majority group. Since one is being raised in such a context and thus has become intimately familiar with it, one will not perceive it as unusual. In the end, she presents the following framework of strategies that are used in the denial of racism (based on the typology presented by Stanley Cohen in 1955):

- | | |
|----------------------------|---|
| • Denial in good faith | One honestly thinks that (s)he's telling the truth. |
| • Denial as outright lying | Deliberate deception at the individual level and manipulation at the political level. |
| • "Partly" knowing | When one belongs to neither of the above categories can be linked with "transcended possibility of denial" (para. 2). |

Other authors (e.g. Nelson, 2013, (p. 91)) cite Teun van Dijk's typology that defines four types of denial that are more explicit in the underlying goals of the denial, namely:

- | | |
|--------------------|--|
| • Act-denial | "I did not do / say that at all." |
| • Control-denial | "I did not do / say that on purpose." |
| • Intention-denial | "I did not mean that." |
| • Goal-denial | "I did not do / say that, in order to" |

Essed (2004) explains that the resistance and denial in the Netherlands emerged in the 1980's when the topic first entered in politics and academia. The move to the political right in the 1990's along with the "uses and abuses of the label of political correctness (p. 121)" made it more acceptable to be openly anti-immigrant or oppose against a specific religion, mostly the Islam. Incidents such as 9/11 only increased the "assimilative pressures" and an overall negative judgment towards 'allochtonen' (i.e. the Dutch term for someone of foreign origin). She also has noted a development in which the multicultural society is more accepted, but that "[t]he term racism – one among other relevant explanatory notions in this context – has been pushed out of Dutch everyday discourse, in political circles as well as in academia (p. 122)."

One curious aspect that is stipulated by Essed (2004) is the notion that the domestic context (in our case the Netherlands) is somehow unique and thus incomparable to those in other countries. In other words, it might happen somewhere else, but not here. At least, not as it is commonly defined. Thus, Essed's experienced resistance from academics might be explained from their perspective of "importing US and UK notions of racism into the Netherlands (p. 122)."

Interestingly, Petrova (2000) also notes the dangers of accepting racism as a side effect of an increased consciousness about racism denial. She states that some might construct the mindset that whilst they regret the presence of racism, they are not strong enough to do anything about it, do not want to be constantly reminded of it or since it does not concern them directly, accept racism as a fact of life. Petrova also notes that this mindset is rare in democratic societies, but that it might surface as part of the individualistic culture wherein accepting oneself is a virtue.

1.3 Discourse and rhetoric

Just like the concept of racism itself, the denial of racism also has a multitude of manifestations that can be employed within various contexts of discourse. To keep this section transparent, this paragraph is divided between institutional responses and responses that can occur between two or more interlocutors or within an informal context. This division is merely to maintain clarity in the text; it in no way represents a legitimate theoretical construct and one needs to be aware the following processes are interrelated and context sensitive.

1.3.1 Public denial

According to Liu and Mills (2006), in order to study modern racism on a societal level, one needs to be aware of ‘plausible deniability’ as a central notion and its influence on discourse. This means that one can publically defend oneself by convincingly distancing oneself from any racist intent. Interestingly enough, they also plead for a wider perspective from the scientific community, claiming that whilst some remarks can be construed as racist, it can also be attempts to preserve other, significant power relations such as market fundamentalism. In her paper about racism denial, with the discrimination about Romani gypsies as a prime example, Petrova (2000) distinguishes the following strategies in which accusations of racism were denied by mainly Eastern European governments:

- Representing problems as social and economic issues.
- Equality for the law assures that no one is affected by discrimination, favoring one group is unfair.
- Equality in opportunities makes misfortune of one group their own responsibility.
- Legislation is enough to reduce racist practices and attitudes in society.
- Racial differences are based on cognitive disorders.
- Racial differences are based on behavioral disorders.
- In order for one to receive rights, one has to make a contribution to society.
- Using successful minority members in order to deny accusations of racism also referred as tokenism.
- Using personal disclaimers: “I am not racist, but...”
- Self-exclusion from mainstream: “Some of my best friends are...”
- Romanticizing characteristics or nature of certain cultural or minority groups in society.
- Overly-optimistic referral to historical progress in race relations.
- Normalizing the situation.
- Interpretative denial by downplaying injury of affected.
- Condemning the condemners.

Petrova (2000), notes that the abovementioned strategies and arguments are not only influenced by their context, but also warns that those who deny accusations of racism are not always unilateral in

their discourse, meaning that they can use conflicting arguments that “are not quite rational and can rotate in a vicious circle (para. 2).” Nolan (2013) also presents a list of ‘societal-level denial discourses’ that shows parallels with the list above, albeit less extensive. However, he also notes the options of outright denying that there is racism (i.e. absence discourse) or arguing that racism only affects a small portion of society (i.e. deflection from the mainstream).

In the end, the goal of these discursive strategies is to convince others that one is a decent, moral and responsible citizen that is rationally oriented about the subject in question, in which the self is positively presented and the other negatively situated in a deracialized discourse setting through the use of liberal arguments; e.g. everyone is equal and thus no group should be more advantageous than another by giving them extra rights, opportunities or benefits (Augoustinos & Every, 2010; Augoustinos & Every, 2007). Consequently, this also has led to the development of marginalizing those who strive to combat racism. Anti-racists are being framed as a privileged minority that are out of touch with reality since they cannot see the problems associated with living in a multicultural society or are claimed to be of malicious intent, oppressive, discriminatory or plain crazy. Thus, accusations of racism are found to be unreasonable and extreme, or the abbreviation of a norm; namely rational inclusivity (Augoustinos & Every, 2010; Riggs & Due, 2010).

This is clear when one looks at how racism has been framed and consequently perceived in the British version of Big Brother. Riggs and Due (2010) studied the manner in which one of the hosts dealt with the subject of racism during interviews; something the newspapers wrote extensively about after a couple of incidents between the contestants. They argue that these instances made the public think about the legitimacy of Great Britain as a tolerant nation. The authors interestingly point out that if there is indeed a case of racism, it was mostly construed to be the responsibility of an individual, instead of a structural, societal phenomenon. This consequently perpetuated the notion of a rational and tolerant society. Due to social anxieties when faced with accounts of racism, accusations were indirectly formulated and racism itself was deemed as something that is largely a matter of perception and requires hard evidence (e.g. seeing it firsthand or via recordings). It has also been shown that the severity of racism were often diminished through the use of euphemisms such as ‘bullying’, or by partially excusing those involved when they claimed they were not aware of the nature of their actions and how it could be interpreted as offensive.

The abovementioned does explain why accusations are accompanied with “moral outrage that are often treated as more extreme than racism itself (Augoustinos & Every, 2010, p. 251).” This has resulted in the tendency to disguise accusations and resistance in euphemisms in order to maintain the earlier mentioned reasonable rationality. Even though marginalized groups might be more sufficient in recognizing racism due to their experiences, they are nevertheless prohibited to speak freely about it (Sommers & Norton, 2006; Nelson, 2013; Miles & Brown, 2003). When this is not the case, racism charges are often judged as being too simplistic or an obstruction to free speech (Augoustinos & Every, 2010). Thus, both the persons that commit acts that are considered to be racist in nature by the

majority and those that fight against acts of racism are placed at the periphery of society, as deviations of a civilized norm.

1.3.2 *Personal denial*

Babacan (2008) performed a survey (unpublished) among 50 Australian participants that accurately represented the community and he found several recurring patterns in how one avoids racism in everyday talk. These patterns show correlations with the list as presented by Petrova (2000) in the previous paragraph, these include:

- Denials, disclaimers or justifications to appear non-racist.
- Denial to defend and to portray oneself positively.
- Reversing the charge of racism, e.g. “ethnic groups are racist too.”
- Trivializing incidents, labeling it as exaggeration or ‘alleged racism’.
- Use of substitute words since the use of ‘racism’ is taboo.
- Transference from self to reflect on others, e.g. “My neighbor thinks...”

However, it is important to realize that racism denial (or creating an alternative, tolerant image) is not merely an individual affair. As Condor, Figgou, Abell, Gibson and Stevenson (2006) point out in their article, racism denial is a discursive construct that is the result of a joint performance with the other interlocutors. The acceptance of the claim that one is unprejudiced is influenced by the degree of acceptance or rejection by the ‘audience’. The authors connected this with the face management theory as proposed by Goffman (i.e. everyone strives to have a positive image in relation to others). When one is accused of racism, one’s social identity is damaged and thus actions will be undertaken in order to repair and maintain a positive image of oneself. Building on the same theory, Chiang (2010) explicates *positive face* (i.e. positive, consistent self-image) and *negative face* (i.e. personal preserves and rights) as being influential in the dialogical process.

The manner in which one can do this varies, as seen in the list above and the various strategies and footing (i.e. alignment regarding participation status within a conversation) can be implemented within a single conversation. Thus, one needs to be aware that positions or even allegiances of interlocutors can shift within a conversation. As Condor et al. (2006) note, the fact that one can take on various identity constructions (e.g. as an individual, as a married couple or as a representative of a group) within these conversation further complicates the analysis of prejudice denials.

For instance, public figures such as talk show hosts (who have a less strong institutional voice than journalists or news anchors and are thus more perceived as individuals in the media landscape) utilize a variety of ways in order to discredit the claims of racism from their guests; ranging from outright denial, presenting reputable sources, using institutional footing (e.g. using ‘we’) or undermining the objectivity of facts, to victimizing themselves as being misunderstood, reversing the claim (i.e. the other is intolerant) or using so-called ‘self-sufficient arguments’ such as the freedom of

speech (Chiang, 2010). It is interesting to note that Chiang described the American situation as being contextually different compared to the rest of the world due to the mistrust towards the government and prevalent individualistic values, or as she argues: “To protect a politically correct image, American public figures must risk being politically impolite (p. 291)”.

When there are conversations in small groups, interlocutors can work together, taking shared responsibility in order to protect themselves or the group (Condor et al., 2006). For instance, Condor et al. (2006) demonstrate through several pieces of transcript of informal conversations that remarks or stories uttered by one person can be effectively reframed by the other in order to steer the conversation in a certain direction or can result in repair actions such as downgrading when a remark is considered to be face-threatening (e.g. discriminatory remarks). Again, the success of these acts depends on the acceptance by the audience.

The opposite can also take place; it has been shown in a survey study conducted by Sommers and Norton (2006) that if someone does not want to be associated with groups that have been stigmatized as being racist (or other undesirable social categories), that they will attribute characteristics to them that are distant from their own, also called ‘non-self-relevant traits’ by the authors. Unfortunately, this also means that the notion of racism itself becomes ‘less inclusive’ since its conceptualization is based on these suggestions; for instance (White) racists were evaluated by the participants as violent, hateful, devious and untrustworthy.

1.4 A cherished tradition

Even though the concept of racism and the construction of racism denial and how it is represented in various conversational contexts are of significance in order to understand the behavior of supporters of Zwarte Piet during the debate, it does not present the whole spectrum of sociological contexts that are involved. As described in the previous paragraphs, Sinterklaas is celebrated on a national scale in which the whole country immersed in various kinds of festivities such as parades and visits to elementary schools. Stores and supermarkets are specifically decorated for this occasion and an assortment of Sinterklaas related sweets are available, such as the infamous ‘pepernoten’ and chocolate letters. The media also spends a great amount of attention to this celebration, even to the point that there is a devoted news program called “Het Sinterklaas Journaal” in which the exploits of Sinterklaas and his Zwarte Pieten are followed closely. This program is constructed in a similar format as that of a traditional news broadcast; including an anchor, eye witness reports of children, correspondents and personal interviews of the involved Zwarte Pieten and Sinterklaas himself.

A study conducted by Nederlands Centrum voor Volkscultuur en Immaterieel Erfgoed (2010) revealed that Sinterklaas or more specifically the evening in which presents are exchanged (i.e. Pakjesavond), is regarded to be the most important tradition in the Netherlands, followed by setting up the Christmas tree and the markets on Queens Day (recently changed to Kings Day). Needless to say, Sinterklaas is a tradition that seems to be deeply rooted in the collective consciousness of the

Netherlands. This is the final aspect that will be discussed in the theoretical framework of this study. What does it mean if something has been made a tradition and why exactly is change accompanied with friction or opposition? Combined with the previous topics, the theoretical framework provides a solid basis upon which the remainder of this study can be constructed.

1.4.1 *What are traditions?*

One of the first things that needs to be noted is that there is a discrepancy regarding the manner in which academia tries to objectively construct the concept of tradition and its impact on contemporary society and how individuals within said society perceive and attribute meaning and function to traditions in their daily lives (Bronner, 2000). Generally speaking, tradition is often presented as the polar opposite of modernity and the rise of the nation state and thus implicitly associated with cultural fixation, but also with regional retardation and backwardness (Handler & Linnekin, 1984; Hofer, 1984; Noyes, 2011).

This is not so surprising when considering the fact that the increasing appreciation for tradition are related with migrations waves, for example when people moved from the countryside to the major urbanized areas in early modern Europe (Noyes, 2009). Hofer (1984) even speaks of a “mass-production of tradition” as products of national heritage were put on display in order to instill “tradition-awareness” during the Victorian era, coincidentally a historical period characterized by significant social and technological changes. Jacobs (2007) presents in his study of Shils’ notion of tradition various authors who claim that society is currently ‘detraditionalizing’ under the influence of globalization, however, according to his study it is more so that “[c]ertain traditions have advanced in modernity, whilst others receding or disappearing (p. 151).” He follows Shils’ argumentation that so-called antitraditions (alterations to traditions that are argued to be fundamental to social life) have increased in influence over the past couple of decades, for example the emancipation of women and sexual freedom, but that ‘substantive traditions’ such as respect for authority have slowed the rate of rationalization (according to Shils the dominant tradition of modernity in which one removes inconsistencies and ad hoc elements). Again, this desire to change what has been handed down can be argued to be inherent to traditions as will be explained later on in this paragraph.

When one examines tradition from a scientific standpoint, one will be confronted with a variety of definitions, a history of disagreement and the refinement of the concept due to societal developments and the dominant political climate that associate traditionalism with authority, conservatism and nationalism (Noyes, 2009; Handler & Linnekin, 1984). These transitions influenced the manner in which the folkloric, anthropological and ethnographic research disciplines presented themselves in order to continue providing their additive value to the scientific community as well as society as a whole (Noyes, 2009).

One of the earlier scientific perspectives regarded tradition as a naturalistic process in which a static set of cultural characteristics such as customs or items were handed over from generation to

generation, almost without a second thought since it is the basis of social life (Bronner, 2000). Or as Eriksen (2005) describes in her study about the creation of traditions through objects: “It appears to prove that the tradition has *not* been constructed by human action, but has been created and passed on by forces inherent in the object itself (p. 296, italics original).” Deliberate alterations that were made to these traditions were often regarded as manipulations, spurious or ‘fake-lore’ (Hofer, 1984; Handler & Linnekin, 1984). Noyes (2011) warns about these perspectives, claiming that it encourages the freezing of living traditions, ‘re-racialization’ on the basis of descent and co-production by the state.

Currently, traditions are seen as dynamic cultural processes in the sense that they are able to change continuously, depending on various environmental, ideological and socio-political contexts (Eriksen, 2005). Traditions are regarded as social tools to achieve specific aims in which one can establish a desired identity and simultaneously differentiate oneself from others, but many other purposes can be derived (see Noyes, 2011). This occurs within a framework of variably valued symbolism and its derived artifacts that are regarded as meaningful in combination with the interaction between intertwined actors of the same cultural group or even between groups (Glassie, 1995; Handler & Linnekin, 1984; Jacobs, 2007; Noyes, 2011). However, as Jacobs (2007) argues, not all traditions are consciously constructed as means to a certain goal, and are instead valued on itself.

Imitation can be considered to be one of the core elements upon which one actively learns the traditions in all its intricate details (Jacobs, 2007), however, according to Shils (1971) it is unlikely that traditions are passed on as perfect replications. They “are always bound to be faulty in some way (p. 151)”, and thus changes no matter how small, slow or invisible, are inevitable to occur whether they are made intentionally or not. But also the innate desire to improve that which has been inherited also has a significant influence in these changes, even if it is only to clarify and strengthen or to reveal underlying principles of a particular tradition. Shils states that these corrections or reinterpretations are often regarded as still being congruent with the tradition. Thus, it will take some time for any deviation of the tradition to be noticed. Though exceptional developments such as religious innovations or scientific discoveries can change traditions in a relatively short amount of time.

Bronner (2000) perfectly demonstrates the flexibility of traditions when referring to the manner in which children’s fairy tale and folkloric books were re-examined to include multiculturalism (e.g. changing skin color), more positive role models (e.g. inclusion of female heroines) and other progressive values that were dominant in the 1990’s. Noyes (2009) on the other hand shows that even within a cultural community there can be variations of the same tradition based on gender and social structure, for example “same-sex gatherings telling stories distinct from those of men (p. 246).” She also adds another dimension by stating that no real claims of ownership of traditions are possible (e.g. indigenous groups protecting their cultural integrity), since traditions travel, intermingle and continue to circulate between various actors in loose, intangible networks and processes that result in numerous reproductions.

Finally, tradition is almost paradoxically seen as something that is constructed in the present.

It is a reinterpretation of the past in which certain aspects of history are strategically selected in order to serve a purpose in the present, for example: increasing globalization causes one political party to appeal to old norms and values (Bronner, 2000; Noyes, 2009; Handler & Linnekin, 1984). The past can be considered to be the foundation upon which both traditions and innovations are legitimized (Shils, 1971). Therefore it has become increasingly difficult to differentiate between more recent traditions and older traditions (Hofer, 1984). The various perspectives in which the past can be construed and used within political discourse are something which will be addressed later.

1.4.2 *What do traditions mean?*

When one looks at the meaning of tradition for individuals and citizens of nations, one is again confronted with a complex field of connotations and perspectives. Tradition is often equated with the past or an idealized picture of the past (Handler & Linnekin, 1984). The reason why this reconstruction is so much valued is because of the morality that is connected to it. For instance, most nations refer to the rural past because the notions of a simplistic lifestyle in which there was stability, clarity and collectivism, which are considered to be desirable in the light of modern times or are deemed to be characteristics that define a collective identity. Handler & Linnekin (1984) give a nice example of the reconstruction and revitalization of old Hawaiian rituals and rural lifestyles in order for the native inhabitants to differentiate themselves from the other ethnicities and cultural groups that are present on the island. They access the past in order to create their new identity and claim their culture to be authentic and valuable. Tradition thus becomes an aspect of one's perceived culture.

From the perspective of individuals, Eriksen (1994) argues that a differentiation can be made between genealogical identity that is comprised of the knowledge of someone's personal or family history, and organic identity in which personal experiences are internalized in relation to a certain tradition. It is the latter that is the most interesting, since it interweaves experience and sentiment with the tradition. In her study on the devotion of Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Rome, Eriksen (2005) connects traditionalization, the process in which new traditions are made and elevated above the local context in order to achieve certain aims, with the need of individuals to universalize certain experiences and realms of discourse in order to give legitimacy to the tradition as well as authority.

Within the context of this study, most Dutchmen have fond memories of celebrating Sinterklaas together with their family throughout their lives, in different roles and contexts (e.g. as a child, as a parent, as a grandparent). The tight relationships between family members as well as the time of the year (i.e. cold, dark winter) ensures that the positive emotions and connotations that were constructed over the years to be synonymous with the tradition itself. Therefore in the mind of many, Sinterklaas equals happiness, innocence and warmth and thus should be a cherished tradition. Throughout history, starting as forbidden catholic celebration to a deeply entrenched part of Dutch folklore (Booy, personal communication), one can see that the celebration is elevated above something of regional occurrence, giving the tradition more prominence and authority until it is

celebrated in the entire nation, re-affirming the experience of those who celebrate it; it is our festivity, it is our tradition. Shils (1971) speaks of a 'contagious effect' when there is consensual acceptance of a tradition. The anonymity of the collective is also considered to be a source of authority that transcends individual perceptions and ideas even when it operates on a subconscious level.

However, even among individuals, there can be varying perspectives, especially when one compares it between generations. Eriksen (1994) shows in her study that opinions about the nature of tradition and the role of the individual therein differs significantly between young people and elders. The older generations look at tradition from a macro-level; they see it as something that is carried by the entire community and thus it is a collective responsibility to assure its existence. Everybody needs to hand down the tradition to the next generation, or else it will slowly die out. This is also something that characterizes the manner in which older generations look at traditions; it is situated in the past. Their personal experiences of a simpler time with clear rules and boundaries are threatened by modernity that, in their point of view, tears down cherished norms and values.

This is in stark contrast with the younger generation that views traditions as something that is performed in the present, something that is still done today. Furthermore, their perspective on traditions is also more individualistic; it is not something one does as a community or society, instead it is performed alone or with family and friends. Also the manner in which one celebrates their traditions is a matter of individual choice. Bronner (2000) cites a survey study that confirms this difference in mindsets between generations. According to the results, there is a collective perception in America (77%) that "one's parents' generation always followed traditions more than the present generation (p. 152)." The reason for this was that youth is considered to be more focused on achieving changes than holding on to traditions.

Interestingly, Shils (1971) describes the process of change of traditions as an eternal struggle between the center (e.g. firmly established institutions and older generations) and the peripheries (e.g. newly founded institutions and younger generations) of a society. The center wants to enforce their traditional beliefs on the peripheries and the peripheries rejects these notions, resulting in various modifications since these peripheries cannot completely separate themselves from the center if they wish continue to function within society. However, Shils also mentions that compromises can be achieved in which the peripheral beliefs are incorporated into the center, something that has occurred in the United States for the past 150 years and in Great Britain the past decades.

1.4.3 *What can traditions do?*

As Noyes (1994) explicates in her historical study about the concept of tradition that: "[f]olk voice offered commercial as well as political opportunities (p. 246)." This confirms that aside from personal sentiment and individual cultural identity, traditions can be used with various agendas in mind. One does not need to look far to see this practice; the tourism industry thrives on the expressions of traditions or folklore in various countries, regions and cities that are said to be unique in the world.

The degree which they are authentic can be argued, since traditions are consciously made as stated earlier, especially within the political arena.

Political movements always had a seemingly dichotomous relationship with the word and concept of tradition. Historically speaking, for progressive movements, tradition is representative of the old world in which skewed power relations between gender, social class or race determined everyday life. Furthermore, the progressives view conservatives as “being stuck on traditions to the point of wearing blinders to modern-day social realities (Bronner, 2000, p. 147).” On the other side of the spectrum, conservatives view tradition as something that is natural, something that is sensible, morally sound and that which forms the foundation of national culture and society. These are more commonly referred to as “traditional values” in their campaigns (Bronner, 2000, p. 147).

It is also interesting to see that both of these movements use the same concept (albeit with conflicting semantics) from a different perspective. The conservational politicians generally focus their discourse on the endangerment of identity (e.g. increasing power of the European Union threatens sovereignty of member states) or the loss of norms and values (e.g. increasing crime rates). They approach tradition as a bridge from the past to the present: to look for solutions of today’s problems, one needs to look back. Bronner (2000) describes that these movements often work from a nationalistic mindset in which the family, community and religion are centralized.

The progressive politicians on the other hand, see the present as a bridge to the future, since the rightfulness of the actions in the past can be considered to be disputable. Bronner (2000) states that these movements have a pluralistic mindset that wants to break away from the racist and sexist hegemony of the elite that encourages marginalization and denies participation of various groups in society. They want to create new traditions that celebrate differences between communities in order to increase tolerance within society. This is not to say that they want to get rid the old traditions entirely. Their avoidance of the use of ‘tradition’ is most likely motivated by its connotations with the past and authority (Bronner, 2000).

The most striking aspect however, is the fact that the concept of tradition is closely connected with the creation of national identity. Hofer (1984) explicated in his study of the differences between tradition as perceived in East Europe and the West, that nations use traditions, who are often purified of unwanted elements and/or foreign influences, to abolish the presumed backwardness from the common people and to stress their individuality as a nation in order to severe “internal ethnic needs.” These are often considered to be increasing self-esteem and more importantly, support for national goals. In other words, one uses history in order to reach desired modernity. This is achieved via internalization of the used symbolism within the consciousness of the public. When these symbols become emotionally loaded, they become an integrated part of the personal identity as we have seen in the previous paragraphs.

2. Methodology

The extensive literature research has made it abundantly clear that the topics of racism and tradition are sensitive and can evoke intense emotions. One could also see that there are various perspectives one can take on these issues from both academia and society in general and that these are occasionally in conflict with each other. Especially in a situation that can be rightfully characterized as polarizing, it is of utmost importance that existing nuances and variations within the mindsets of those involved are accurately examined.

For these reasons the current study will be qualitative in nature, meaning that the researcher will focus his efforts on uncovering underlying argumentations and motivations as well as possible. In other words, one is focused on sketching an in-depth picture and thus the quantity of participants that are feasibly possible within the limited timeframe of this study will be lower in comparison with a quantitative research. However, this only enables the researcher to study the data as well as the participants themselves more closely.

Another thing that needs to be noted is that representativity of the full range of possible perspectives cannot be guaranteed. This is not to say that the data will be less valid, on the contrary, by carefully examining the “how and why” of a participant one can yield new insights and possible directions for future research. Furthermore, since this subject has been less frequently studied, the nature of this study will also be exploratory. Again, this represents opportunities for the researcher, but also increases the importance of focusing the research, something that will be explained below.

2.1 Research question

Based on the above mentioned introduction, as well as the questions that were raised during the construction of the theoretical framework, the following central research question was formulated:

In what kind of manner are the convictions of Zwarte Piet supporters framed and in what kind of degree can their defense be construed as an act of racism?

Since this question is too vague and all-encompassing to answer directly, several sub-questions were formulated that each stipulated a related aspect from the central question:

- What kinds of perspectives exist among supporters regarding Zwarte Piet?
- What kinds of perspectives exist among supporters regarding the celebration of the Sinterklaas tradition and its history?
- How do the supporters experience and perceive the Zwarte Piet debate?
- How do the supporters experience and perceive opponents of Zwarte Piet?

2.2 Research tools

In order for the study to acquire sufficient detailed information about the underlying motivations of the participants, a semi-structured interview has been chosen as the most suited research tool. There are several factors that influenced this decision, of which the most significant was the degree of depth in which topics could be explored by the researcher. During an interview, the researcher has more personal freedom to steer the conversation in the desired direction without leading the participant to give socially desired answers and to pursue interesting new leads or interesting remarks that are uttered during the conversation by the participant, then when one would have when distributing questionnaires or closed interviews. Due to the fact that the topics and questions are not fixed in order, both the participant and researcher are engaged in a conversation that is situated in a more naturalistic setting, which can create a suitable atmosphere for the participant since he/she feels more at ease and is thus less anxious or feels less pressured to perform. This relative intimacy consequently can provide more honest and less self-censored opinions, however, this speculation cannot be proven.

Since this study is centered around a subject that is very personal and emotional, one of the top priorities prior to the start of the interview was to assure to the participant that everything that is discussed will be processed with the utmost care and that anonymity is assured, unless they explicitly state to have no problems with revealing their identity in this study, such as Jan van Wijk, chairman of the Sint Nicolaas Genootschap Nederland. Despite this assurance, one cannot ignore the possible subconscious effects of the presence of a voice recorder during the conversations. This is why the researcher explicitly stated prior to every interview that it was only so that he could direct his full attention to the conversation since the sight of someone hastily scribbling down in a notebook whilst one is talking can slow down or alter the amount of details in the story and motivations in order to unburden the researcher. This effectively changes the conversation to a summarization and can result in a misrepresentation that lacks the depth of the variety of underlying arguments and opinions this study is aiming to uncover. However, the researcher always made some short notes, including the occasions when the official recording stopped but informal conversations concerning Zwarte Piet continued. More extensive notes were taken when the quality of the recording was considered doubtful, for instance when the interview was held in an unexpected crowded setting.

Due to the locality of the Sinterkaas tradition (i.e. it is only celebrated in this form within the Netherlands and Flanders, Belgium) and nationality of the participants (Dutch), the interviews were conducted in Dutch. This also made it easier for participants who were not very proficient in English to accurately voice their opinions. The interview was divided in several topics based on the formulated research questions, namely: personal memories regarding the Sinterklaas tradition and Zwarte Piet as well as their perceptions and opinions, but also ethical concerns surrounding the debate of 2013. The underlying reason to explore these subjects was not only to create an informal atmosphere and to get more acquainted with the participants; it was also a helpful tool to structure the interviews and to systematically discuss various aspects of the multilayered Zwarte Piet debate within a limited

timeframe. Utilizing these various subjects made it easier to ask sensitive questions regarding racism and the personal argumentations and convictions that the participating supporters used to frame the racism allegations surrounding Zwarte Piet and their defense of the tradition. That this was not an unnecessary precaution was quickly demonstrated by the emotional attachment and intensity many participants displayed during the interviews.

Another tool that was used during this study to acquire deeper understanding of the mindset and attitudes of participants were hypothetical scenarios in which one was asked to explain how they would respond if they: 1) encountered someone who had never heard of Sinterklaas and 2) someone who was genuinely hurt by Zwarte Piet. By employing these thought exercises one does not only achieve better understanding of one's perception and possible behavior (even though there is still the chance that one gives desirable answers), it can also hint at underlying feelings and provide clues regarding additional directions for further investigation.

The topics were subsequently covered through the means of several sub questions in which the topics were explored as thoroughly as possible without being overbearing or exhausting for the participant. For example, the topic of celebrating Sinterklaas was explored through the questions whether the participant still celebrated and how, how one would explain the tradition to those who are less familiar with it, in what degree one would oppose further adjustments and so on. In appendix 1 (page 60) one can find the script that was used by the researcher to conduct the interviews.

Furthermore, participants were presented with several media excerpts approximately in the middle of the interview. However, in some occasions this element was withheld due to time constraints and the significant amount of detail in the answers of the participant. The researcher collected four news articles from the internet and printed them in order to physically hand them over to the participant. These articles together represented several highlights of the debate, these include: a statement made by the Prime Minister, an advice made by the UN pleading for government involvement in the debate, an incident that occurred during a Zwarte Piet protest rally and finally an article covering the Facebook page 'Pietitie'. Not only does this create the opportunity to discuss specific topics, several participants also stated after the interview that they experienced this intervention to be a welcome and pleasant change. This probably has to do with the fact that the participant holds something in his or her hands and also reads a small section from the article along with it, effectively creating a different discursive context and change of activity. Screenshots of the articles that were presented during the conversations can be found in appendix 2 (page 61).

It needs to be noted that not every question presented in the script was asked to every participant and that it was occasionally rephrased depending on the context of the conversation and personal judgment of the researcher towards the participant regarding formulation of the questions or introduction of the various topics. Also, unscripted questions were asked when the participant offered new insights, had interesting remarks or presented interesting openings to in-depth questions about the subject at hand. Alterations to the manner in which the interviews itself were conducted were also

executed when requested by the participant. For example, one participant declared that she preferred to do the interview via e-mail. For this occasion, the interview was reformulated in an open questionnaire comprised of the ten most important questions of the regular script with the instruction to give answers as articulated and extensive as possible. One can find the questionnaire in appendix 3, (page 65).

The most serious drawback of this method is that the participant has ample time to adjust her answers and to think about the questions deeply, giving a less spontaneous representation of the motivations and opinions of the participant. Even though the participant has been given the instruction to send the questionnaire back within a certain timeframe, this cannot eliminate the above mentioned drawbacks. The absence of personal contact and the visual cues that occur during a conversation (e.g. gaze, gesture, tone of speech, etc.) can also influence the manner in which answers are given, as well as the interpretation of data. The missing nuance in both question and answer can cause the participant and researcher to miss important cues. For instance, during the interview of the first participant, the researcher noticed that a certain remark regarding Zwarte Piets changing colors was spoken with unusual negative intensity, making the utterance: “It looks ridiculous too”, a valuable indicator about the feelings of the participant. Furthermore, questions from the researcher can be framed within the appropriate context suited for the personality of the participant and context of the conversation. Questions can also be reformulated or explicated more when its intention is not clear to the participant.

2.3 Participants

Since the Sinterklaas tradition is celebrated on such a large scale, the selection of participants was virtually unrestricted. The only limitation was that one had to be a supporter of Zwarte Piet. Within the setting of the debate, one can see that the opinions and argumentations of supporters were less prominently portrayed in the media. This perception has been confirmed by several participants (see paragraph 3.2) and has been one of the main reasons to look exclusively at supporters. Also, when looking at racism denial research in general, one can see that the conclusions concerning the ‘wrong side’ have the potential to provide valuable insights and increased understanding of how one frames their defense or protest in a racism context. This could lead to possible solutions or clues to elevate the Zwarte Pietsen debate. Therefore, the choice was made to look at the debate from the perspective of the supporters. The participant population that has been approached in this study thus represents a variety of degrees in which one supports the tradition as it now stands. This spectrum ranges from fanatical supporters to participants who can be considered to stand somewhere in the middle; they do not want to see Zwarte Piet to disappear, but they are also convinced that something has to change in order for the tradition to continue.

The distribution between genders is slightly uneven, with six women and eight men. It is not known how this could have affected the results of the study, however, considering the fact that Sinterklaas is a tradition that is celebrated by the entire family and in which both parents are active and personally involved, this should not present any difficulties. Furthermore, one should also consider the

fact that family compositions can differ significantly from each other, presenting different contexts in which the tradition can be celebrated (e.g. divorced parents, same gender parents, etc.). However, since this is also an exploratory study, these factors were not taken into consideration upon selecting the participants in order to make increase the range of information sources as wide as possible.

Most of the participants in the study have followed or are still following higher education. Normally, this could present problems with the representation of the study, however, during conduction of the interviews, one can conclude that regardless the level of education, the motivations of and opinions about why one supported Zwarte Piet were largely consistent. The only significant difference was the manner in which some participants were able to support their perspectives with theory or opinionated articles, whilst others were more orientated towards their own personal experiences and what they had gathered from the media and environment. The reasons as to why this might be the case has already stipulated been upon within the theoretical framework and will be further explored within the concluding chapters of this paper.

The recruitment of participants was structured in several interlocking stages; at the onset of the study, the personal social network of the researcher was carefully mapped and explored to find friends, family members, acquaintances who were supporters of Zwarte Piet. This followed with an additional exploration of the social networks of those participants. Furthermore, several messages were posted on the Facebook pages connected with Tilburg University, including the Premaster page, the Master page and the student association (i.e. Flow) connected with the faculty the researcher is affiliated with (i.e. Communication and Information Sciences). After a week or so, a reminder would be placed on the pages, albeit it more concise. Messages were also sent to professional business networks that the researcher was also a member of, for example “Logeion”, a platform for communication professionals on LinkedIn. Surprisingly, all this effort also resulted that students associated with the researcher started to repost his messages on their own personal pages, expanding his reach even further.

Additionally, Facebook pages that were created by supporters of Zwarte Piet, for example “Zwarte Piet moet blijven” [translation: “Zwarte Piet must stay”], were approached by the researcher in which the administrators were asked if they were interested in participating and if they would like to publish a message on their page. The authors of the aforementioned page were the only ones to agree with this request. Other pages indicated that they were too busy or had no interest in participating. Furthermore, websites and Facebook pages of Sinterklaas associations (i.e. organizations responsible for parades and other kinds of activities related to the celebration) were approached in a similar fashion. This yielded several kinds of replies, from those who were interested to participate, to those who had interest but declined due to the sensitivity of the subject or because they wished to remain neutral. Administrators of forums dedicated to parenting related issues were also contacted and this made it possible to place a message on their respective boards. Following the same line of reasoning, various overarching educational organizations situated in the Dutch province of Noord-Brabant were also approached with the request to participate for both parents and teaching staff.

Finally, various organizations such as Nederlands Centrum voor Volkscultuur en Immaterieel Erfgoed [translation: Dutch Center for Folk Culture and Immaterial Heritage], Meertens Institute and the news program EenVandaag were approached for additional information, supplementary data and advice on how to investigate this matter or any eventual archived materials relevant for this study.

2.4 Analysis and report

The conducted interviews were recorded on a professional voice recorder after acquiring explicit permission from the participant. Alongside the recording, both written and mental notes were also used in order to process the data. Shortly after returning from the meeting with the participant, the quality of the recording was checked. When reaching the conclusion that it was unsatisfactory, for example due to overpowering background noise or undecipherable voices, the researcher immediately started to reconstruct the conversation with the notes made during the conversation and his memory. When the quality was of satisfactory quality, it would be labelled and a short summary was written about any extraordinary occurrences during the conversation if applicable.

The recordings were then transcribed partially; meaning that the researcher listened to the recording and marked the time when something interesting in regard to the study was said. The reasoning behind this is twofold. The most important argument is that it saved the researcher precious time by eliminating elements of the conversation that were of not of any added value to the study, such as anecdotes given by the participant that were not related to the topic that was currently discussed. Second and closely related, upon saving time, the researcher would be able to concentrate his efforts on analyzing and structuring the data in relation to the research question(s).

The marked utterances would then subsequently be transcribed minus repetitions, incomplete utterances and prolonged periods of silence and contemplation (unless it provided valuable contextual data) and were categorized according to subject. After the transcription of the separate conversations were complete, the utterances were put in a Word document in which every utterance according to subject were displayed simultaneously, making it easier for the researcher to draw conclusions and discover patterns within the data. The quotes were read again and summarized, effectively creating a global summarization of the study.

This summary was used to construct the result section of this paper as well as the following conclusions and discussion. If needed, conversations were listened to again, especially when it concerned utterances of participants that were to be directly quoted in the paper. This way, the accuracy of the utterance as well as the data itself could be assured. When writing down the conclusions, the theoretical framework was consulted once more and the patterns that were discovered within the data were connected to each other in order to arrive at a carefully constructed conclusion. This ultimately provided the answer to the research questions that were formulated at the beginning and refined during the course of the study.

3. Results

Despite the fact that every interview was different to a certain degree, for example in length, subjects discussed and so on, each conversation managed to follow the same lines of inquiry as described in the previous Methodology section. This section describes in detail the results, or more accurately put, the similarities between the personal accounts of those that participated in this study. Ultimately, this will help in constructing general conclusions or perspectives that are needed to answer the research questions formulated earlier in this thesis. Similarly to the interview itself, this section is structured according to several subjects; first the personal history of the participants in regard to the tradition is discussed as well as their experiences and perceptions of the 2013 debate. This is followed by the perspectives surrounding the role of Zwarte Piet as well as the uniqueness and validation of the Sinterklaas tradition in the light of the racism accusations. Since the interviews were held in Dutch, the following quotes were translated as faithfully as possible both in meaning and formulation.

3.1 Personal history of celebration

When asking the participants about their memories regarding Zwarte Piet and the Sinterklaas celebration in general, the duality in their experience was most prevalent. On the one hand the presence and the various festivities that were organized surrounding these figures as they visited the country and the prospect of presents and sweets were a source of excitement. Many participants also recalled their times spent intimately with the family during these days. The combination of the dark, cold winter days, the cozy atmosphere when the whole family is together singing songs and playing games as well as the eventual pay-off of receiving presents makes it that all of the fourteen participants have very positive, warm memories about this tradition.

“Yes, it was exciting, it was something mysterious, but it was also a little scary you know? It was something of an adventure or exploration for the children you know; some kind of game.”

- Participant 2

On the other hand, several candidates also expressed that it was a mysterious and slightly anxious time of the year. This had to do with the fact that Zwarte Piet is also considered to be the eyes and ears of Sinterklaas; ultimately he is the one that tells Sinterklaas the degree in which a child has been good and thus receives presents or naughty and thus receives less or nothing at all. Especially the older participants remember Zwarte Piet as somewhat of a boogeyman and the differing pedagogical standards of that time translated itself in the fact that he was also the one that executed corporal punishments to children who misbehaved. This made the few weeks in which Sinterklaas was staying in the Netherlands a little frightening for some:

“In those days we still had a toilet outside of the house, so I had to go outside as a small child at night. Well, during that period it was out of question; I’d rather wet my bed figuratively speaking.”

- Participant 9

However, despite the differences in which Sinterklaas and Zwarte Piet manifested themselves between generations and the universal excitement whether one would receive presents or not, the positive atmosphere surrounding the tradition and the underlying ideology of compassion for others and togetherness was stronger and more clearly present in the minds of the participants. It is also striking that all participants indicate that they all used to celebrate Sinterklaas in the traditional manner when they were children, meaning that they presented one of their shoes with gifts for the horse of Sinterklaas, wish lists or sing a little song to get small sweets and presents in return. The grand scale in which the tradition is celebrated and visible was also an aspect that was stipulated by several participants; for instance, most of them remembered occasions in which Sinterklaas visited their elementary schools accompanied with his Zwarte Pieten.

“The thing that stayed the most with me were the pepernoten that were strewn around in the classroom, the tangerines that were handed out and Sinterklaas of course. What I mainly remember about Zwarte Piet were the clothes he wore, the golden earrings and that it was always someone else who played it.”

- Participant 6

This usually continued until the evening of the 5th of December which is more famously known as ‘Pakjesavond’ in which Sinterklaas together with Zwarte Piet or only Zwarte Piet visits each family and leaves presents somewhere around the house, loudly knocking as he departs to alert the children about their presents being delivered. Almost every participant spoke of admiration in which the whole family, including parents and sibling who no longer believed in Sinterklaas played along and worked together so that the smaller children would enjoy the illusion. As the participants grew older, they often practiced another tradition called ‘Surprise’ in which the family draw straws and secretly buys gifts for each other accompanied with a simple, written rhyme.

There were only a few participants that still actively celebrated Sinterklaas or did something special in that period. However, the fact that the story and mythology surrounding the tradition are supported by everybody, upholding the illusion, was shared among the participants as one of the reasons why this tradition is so endearing:

“Every child is raised with it; every child is told from birth that Sinterklaas is real, so the parents are having fun with it as well. This lasts until the child is five years old or so. Even the twelve years olds are also participating because the small child still believes. This mysterious secrecy surrounding this game is, I think, one of the reasons why Sinterklaas and Zwarte Piet are so popular.”

- Participant 5

3.2 The Zwarte Pieten debate of 2013

The most important aspect when discussing the debate of last year is the fact that, aside from a couple of participants who were more or less obligated to follow the media coverage because they were chairmen of Sinterklaas related associations, most participants did not follow the news that intensively. However, this did not matter since one “could not get around it (participant 6)”, due to the prominent presence of the debate on both the television and the social media. One participant even categorized this debate as a “social media hype (participant 7)”, which was shared by several other participants, indicating that this level of intensity surrounding this debate is considered to be of a temporary nature since “it will be old news next year (participant 3).” Some participants explicitly wished to stay out of the debate and most stated that they did not enter into a discussion with opponents or did not know any opponents. Even so, some also ignored the posts that were dedicated to this issue on social media. The main reason for this was that they felt like the debate was a waste of time and that there were more pressing matters. Those who did enter into a discussion, reported a mutually respectful discussion, however it did not lead to any new insights or conversions:

*“I have two Surinamese colleagues and they found it ridiculous and were opposed to Sinterklaas, weI another colleague and I were supporters.
(...)[I]t was not intense or as volatile as on the internet, it was more like:
How do you feel about it?”*

- Participant 7

One aspect that was also mentioned, especially by participant 11, was that the opponents seemed to get more opportunities to express their opinions and argumentations in the media than the supporters. Participant 11 told an anecdote about the time when he was in discussion with a Surinamese professor who wanted him to provide evidence as to why Zwarte Piet is not racist. To the question if he should not also provide evidence, the professor responded that he did not need to; the appearance of Zwarte Piet was sufficient for his claims. Participant 11 irritatingly remarked that a supporter has to make more effort to substantiate his claims than an opponent in this debate.

3.2.1 Characterization of the debate

When exploring the feelings surrounding this debate, it is striking that everyone was either overtly negative or partially neutral when reminiscing about that period. The negativity primarily stemmed from the fact that the discussion was increasingly polarized in comparison with debates that were being held previously. Both the opponents and supporters were characterized by the participants as being too emotional, too aggressive and too blind sighted for the perspective of the other discourse party. This only led to increasing hostility and polarization. Some participants even used hyperboles such as ‘roaring’ to describe the manner in which the conversations between two parties were held in the media. Especially incidents that occurred between the two parties, the most famous being a female protester against the VN being harassed and intimidated by supporters, was unanimously condemned. Almost every participant argued for a balanced and respectful manner in which the discussion should be held. However, there were some who were partially understanding of the behavior of the misbehaving supporters:

“The people who participate in these kinds of protests are very interesting (...). But I think you do get agitated from it, since your mind is occupied with it for some time. They’re making themselves crazy. Some are furious, really furious. I think gut feelings combined with rage makes you blind for everything.”

- Participant 7

The aggressive style of discourse generally harmed the perception of the overall validity of the debate until “it was about nothing (participant 2)” whilst others claimed that it spiraled out of control or arrived at a grinding impasse.

“I’ve been annoyed by the racist comments that were made during the debate. Everyone is entitled to their opinion in this country, but let’s keep it civilized. I think people were more offended by the fact that this discussion was held than with the appearance of Zwarte Piet.”

- Participant 10

3.2.2 Future of the Zwarte Pieten debate

When discussing the future, the answers of the participants were more variable, but can again be differentiated into several categories nonetheless. There were several participants who were pessimistic about the future of the debate. This usually meant that they expected the opponents to ‘win’ and thus their proposed changes concerning the abolishment of Zwarte Piet or replacement with the brightly colored Pieten would come into fruition. This meant the demolition of the tradition in the eyes of the participants and most did not see a viable future for the tradition if Sinterklaas was no

longer accompanied by Zwarte Piet. Another pessimistic view was that some believed that the debate would continue to escalate with increasing polarization and unrest among the Dutch citizens:

“The future of the Zwarte Piet debate is a debate without a solution. There will be many supporters who would like the Sinterklaas tradition to stay as it is. The opponents (in my opinion a small group) will do anything that’s possible and in their power to abolish Zwarte Piet or change the color. This will result in more intense discussions.”

- Participant 10

On the other side of the spectrum, there were participants who believed that the worst was over and that the intensity of the debate in 2013 was largely fueled by both traditional and social media. The media are argued to be fueled by the current socio-political climate of discrimination as a “hot topic (participant 14)” and overall societal polarization. Some participants also attributed the current societal tendency to say whatever one wants without considering the feelings of others or common decency as one of the reasons why this debate was so high in intensity. This tendency was only stimulated by the anonymity and speed of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Participant 11 followed the course of the debate for several decades and he concluded that there were several periods in which the debate grew in intensity, but that these slowly died down to be followed by periods of little activity. However, he could give no concrete prediction for next year since it was dependent of many variables. Finally, there were a few participants who predicted that the intensity of the debate would remain on a similar level.

3.2.3 *Solution of the Zwarte Pieten debate*

When arriving at the possible solution for the debate, this meaning that both parties are content with a solution, one can discern several distinct mindsets among the participants once more. There were several participants who opted to ignore those who opposed Zwarte Piet including the media, arguing that as long as they do not receive any attention, their efforts will soon dissipate and they will move on to another topic or disappear entirely. Participant 8 even referred to the famous African-American actor Morgan Freeman who claimed in an interview that the best solution to solve racism is not to talk about it (CNN, 2005). This line of reasoning is also closely connected with the participants who believe that the debate only stirs up hateful feelings towards those dark of skin. Furthermore, it is also founded on the notion that since the majority of the Netherlands is supportive of the Sinterklaas celebration, those who are opposed to it find themselves in a powerless position. It would seem that the will of the masses dictates:

“Look, you can’t justify the majority of the Dutch inhabitants, who think fondly of the current Sinterklaas tradition, to yield under the increasing pressure of a relatively small group of people.”

- Jan van Wijk

Another solution that was suggested included education about the origins and history of Zwarte Piet and Sinterklaas. It is the expectation of these participants that understanding the underlying ideologies and motivations of this tradition will create more understanding and more insight about the true nature of Zwarte Piet and that the connotations about slavery and racism are farfetched. The scale in which this should occur differed between participants, some pictured it to be an education program on elementary schools, whilst others wanted a special documentary that would be broadcasted on public television. It was also the expectation of participant 7 and 8 that this will stimulate dialogue and confirmation about the nature and activities of Zwarte Piet what will lead to a version in which both parties are satisfied. Lastly there were those who were unable to give a solution or think that too much damage has already been done in order to reach a satisfactory solution.

3.2.4 Perception and understanding of opponents

Even though it has been stipulated earlier how the participants think about the opponents, or more accurately put, the manner in which the supporters perceive the motivations of the opponents, the participants were also asked what they would say to individuals who were genuinely hurt or felt humiliated by the appearance and performance of Zwarte Piet. Despite the fact that this was presented as a hypothetical scenario, it nevertheless provided several lines of conduct that provided more insight in not only how they viewed the opponents and if they had a certain degree of empathy for them, but also implicitly how they perceived the debate.

“What are you trying to achieve, what do you think you can achieve and how much does it really bother you when there is a Zwarte Piet only several weeks in a year? He isn’t even real. What are you trying to gain by going against it? Do you want to take away our celebration, what is your intention exactly? You have traditions of your own do you not? However, we respect them; we don’t try to take it away.”

- Participant 14

One of the most frequent courses of action is that one wants to ask what exactly offends the opponents so much; what aspect of Zwarte Piet is inexcusable in their eyes? When that is pinned down, they would then proceed to ease their minds and doubts about the tradition. This was closely followed by the tendency to explain the tradition carefully and methodically, with special attention to the history and development of the celebrations and symbolism we know today and the fact that any

connection with slavery has been rendered irrelevant or has been completely removed. Furthermore, one can see that the arguments as to why one should preserve the tradition are called out once more:

1. It is a celebration aimed for children who derive much pleasure from it;
2. It is a celebration never meant to harm or offend people, those who are celebrating it are also not even thinking about it;
3. Zwarte Piet is not seen as a stereotypical, subservient negro, he is seen almost a race-neutral person who only does good things and does this in an entertaining manner;
4. Continuing the debate will only make things worse (i.e. polarization).

Participant 12 and 13 were more practical in their approach; they would offer the opponents to visit the Sinterklaas activities they organize in order to see firsthand what this tradition is actually about and to see the joy among the children when they see Zwarte Piet and Sinterklaas.

When asking if the debate has changed the manner in which the participants view or experience the tradition, most of them replied negatively. Even though some have indicated to be more aware about the perception of the opponents in regard to slavery and stereotypes, it however has not led to significant changes in behavior or manners of celebration. Participant 5 claimed that the positive connotations, based on the pleasant memories of the tradition when one is a child, prevented her from seeing Zwarte Piet in a negative perspective:

“[I]t keeps going back to slavery, and of course you can’t throw away history, but they can also understand that we as Dutchmen have never seen it that way. They would of course not understand why we just can’t change the color. No, it just isn’t possible. I would find it very difficult to explain it to that person or be able to help him, how to comfort him. I think he’ll only be more depressed.”

- Participant 5

3.3 Zwarte Piet as the result of a racist practice

When one wants to understand why the participants support Zwarte Piet, it is important to know what Zwarte Piet exactly represents to them; both within the framework of the tradition as well as from a personal point of view. It has been mentioned in the previous paragraph that Zwarte Piet fulfilled a less positive role in the past, since he also inflicted punishment, the most famous being a bundle of sticks also called the ‘roe’ that was used to whip children, or putting children in a bag to ship them off to Spain. The older participants expressed that these conducts were perfectly in line with the pedagogical paradigm that was propagated by the church and society as a whole and that it was performed without question, but that they are thankfully a thing of the past or less pronounced.

The current Zwarte Piet was explicitly described by the participants as a very positive figure

that is always happy and is mainly there to entertain the children. He also changed from a rather clumsy and unintelligent servant who spoke broken Dutch and had to be corrected by Sinterklaas, to a reliable assistant (or even manager according to some) that plays an invaluable role in the entire operation of Sinterklaas; which is delivering the gifts and sweets to all of the children present in the Netherlands. The argument made by opponents that Zwarte Piet plays a subservient role is firmly denied by supporters. While some admitted that there is a hierarchy between Sinterklaas and Zwarte Piet, they do not necessarily construe it as something negative. Participant 8 even explicitly argued that society is comprised of various, interlocking hierarchies in order for it to function efficiently.

“I never thought when I was little: “That’s a slave.” No, he just belonged with Sinterklaas; he was his sidekick.”

- Participant 1

3.3.1 The role of Zwarte Piet

The relationship between the saint and his trusty helper was often described as being mutually respectful. Sinterklaas needs help from Zwarte Piet to do his tasks since he is too old to do it himself, but also to keep him sharp and active since he seems to be gullible and prone to misunderstandings sometimes. Zwarte Piet is very happy to do work for Sinterklaas. Jan van Wijk in this case referred to one of the many legends surrounding Sinterklaas: it is said that he once visited a slave auction in the old Turkish city of Myra and bought every slave (who were all dark skinned) their freedom. He wished them well, but some of the liberated slaves chose to stay at his side to express their gratitude. The voluntary character of Zwarte Piet’s work is an aspect that was also made clear by several participants and is important in their eyes to dismiss some of the claims of the opponents: Zwarte Piet does the chores of Sinterklaas because he likes to do it, not because he is forced to do so.

There were even a few participants who attributed additional, more socially oriented meanings to the figure of Zwarte Piet, claiming that he is a reflection of our contemporary multicultural society or functioning as a bridge between cultures, to promote tolerance towards others. However, the most important aspect is the joy and excitement that is generated during the festivities:

“If you look a few years back, Zwarte Piet was the dumb little servant, but he isn’t anymore. He has in fact become a friend of all children that just likes to associate with children and actively engages them with the festivities. That is, I think, more fun and better.”

- Participant 12

3.3.2 Relationship with slavery

Aside from a loose hierarchy between Sinterklaas and Zwarte Piet - Sinterklaas is portrayed as a bishop so there has to be some level of formality surrounding this persona - most participants

acknowledged or even legitimized the connotations that the opponents have with slavery or the Dutch colonial past. One participant clearly stated that she made the connection only after she saw history books in which the slaves portrayed in a similar fashion as Zwarte Piet. However, what is more prevalent is that these arguments were considered to be no longer valid. In the minds of the supporters slavery is something that happened a few centuries ago and thus no longer has any real effects or influence in modern day life. The participants argued that society as a whole has become more tolerant and that dark skinned people have become integrated, also acquiring positions of power. Interestingly, several participants compared the complaints expressed by the opponents with the descendants of Holocaust survivors who are “taking advantage of the suffering of their ancestors (participant 2)” to achieve personal goals and also point to the temporal element, partially supported by forgiveness:

“Yes, I understand that slavery was something horrible, but so was the Second World War and nowadays we are friendly towards the Germans. I mean, that’s even closer to us. My grandpa was almost shot by a German. I understand why people think this way, but I think it’s a bit exaggerated.”

- Participant 5

Furthermore, every participant stated that they never connected Zwarte Piet with real life dark skinned people when they were children. Partly it was due to the fact that some of the participants lived in small villages, but those who attended public elementary schools and thus were exposed to a multi-cultural setting, had similar claims. The supporters seem to argue that children do not judge Zwarte Piet on the color of his skin, but what he represents; the bringer of gifts and sweets.

3.3.3 Embracement of tradition by black people

Aside from this, one aspect that was frequently mentioned is that there are also people with dark colored skin who also enjoy celebrating Sinterklaas. For example, participant 12 and 13 stated that, when they are organizing various Sinterklaas related activities, there are also a lot of “brown hands” reaching out to receive candy from Zwarte Piet and that “more dark then white children” approach them during their visits of various suburbs and neighborhoods:

“We see that it takes more effort to engage other cultures and ethnicities with Sinterklaas and notice that there’s still a lot of resistance. We continue to try, but it remains difficult. However, when you’re on the street, in a public setting, there’s no difference between these groups.”

- Participant 12

Aside from spectators, there are also black people who like to dress up as Zwarte Piet and thus paint themselves darker, or even as Sinterklaas himself and thus painting themselves white. This so-

called ‘Suri-Sint’ was discussed during the interview with Jan Wijk as one of the commemorated members of the National Sint Nicolaas Society and according to him a sign that Sinterklaas is a celebration for everyone:

“They really immerse themselves and absolutely don’t relate it with the subjects I just discussed [red: slavery]. They are better than that since they are aware that they are living in a completely different time.”

- Jan van Wijk

3.3.4 Function of the blackness

However, it is the blackness of Zwarte Piet that is controversial and the supporters are well aware of that, such as Jan van Wijk who is convinced that opponents will not stop their activities until the blackness is completely gone. This is confirmed by the media when looking at the reports surrounding the court case of Zwarte Piet (e.g. Metro, May 23, 2014). However, this is something that is not negotiable since the blackness of Zwarte Piet also fulfills an important function:

“It has nothing to do with racism; Zwarte Piet is black in order to be unrecognizable. I can imagine that black was chosen because other colors were not easily available in those times. Children of four and five years old are very good in recognizing people.”

- Participant 13

This element of disguise was confirmed by several other participants including participant 9, who played Zwarte Piet and subsequently Sinterklaas in a total timespan of 40 years. During the interview, he told several anecdotes in which even the most intimate of his friends and acquaintances did not recognize him when he first played his role as Sinterklaas.

Should one replace the blackness with smears of soot or with more bright colors such as blue, red or green, it will have a detrimental effect on the experience of the celebration and the tradition itself. Almost every participant reacted hostile towards the idea of Zwarte Pieten with different colors, claiming them to be unrealistic, carnivalesque or making them too similar to clowns:

“It has nothing to do with slavery in any way. I mean, they are people who are doing something out of free will who happen to be brown or black. That’s not the right kind of association is it? Of course you can change the color, but then they’ll have something carnivalesque. I mean Orange Piet or Blue Piet, sorry, but that’s ridiculous.”

- Participant 9

Of course, one could argue that, considering the fact that Zwarte Piet has to entertain children and often achieves this through dancing, jumping and “performing dangerous stunts to the delight of the children (participant 10)”, that this character is something of a jester in itself and this was partially confirmed by the participants, but Zwarte Piet is according to participant 9 also “bound to implicit rules and standards that are expected of him.” He is a bit rebellious in nature, but this is to make children identify with him and as stated earlier, he also needs to keep Sinterklaas on his toes. However, participant 9, who has a lot of experience with theater and acting, also explicated the subtle play between the two personas and their audience, in which one uses the children themselves to establish interactivity and to continue the story, similarly to theater for children.

3.3.5 National sensitivity

When asked to describe the Sinterklaas tradition to a hypothetical foreigner or stranger, most stories were consistent and almost identical. There were however, several participants that indeed once explained the celebration to an actual foreigner for example when studying abroad or conversing with foreign exchange students. One element that stands out in these stories is that Sinterklaas is regarded as a tradition that is difficult to explain or interpret unless one has lived and experienced it firsthand. Another shared characteristic is that the foreigners frequently misunderstood and were very surprised or appalled when one discussed Zwarte Piet, as one participant reminiscences:

“I tried it once when I lived in Austria. When I studied there, I saw a Sinterklaas doll. So I was explaining, but that went horribly wrong. I told them that he travelled with two little negroes and that made me a racist straight away and there was also a colored person in the classroom, so it really spiraled out of control. I’m not explaining it anymore since then.”

- Participant 5

However, participant 9 who is actively engaged with the Sinterklaas Castle in Helmond claimed that international exchange students and foreigners visiting this attraction are mostly pleasantly surprised.

When digging further as to why this tradition is often considered to be typical Dutch and should be preserved, the argumentation given by the participants can be roughly divided into two parts: first of all, the grand scale in which the celebration is organized increases the visibility of the tradition. This tradition does not only take place within the confines of one’s home, even though this was also mentioned as one of the reasons why this tradition is popular, but it also has extensive the media coverage, attention from elementary schools and various stores and supermarkets that are decorated for the occasion. This is a tradition that is celebrated by everyone and openly shared among the Dutch as something valuable:

“It’s so deeply rooted in the Dutch culture; I don’t know anybody who doesn’t like Sinterklaas. You’ll eventually stop believing in it, but it retains an incredible atmosphere.”

- Participant 7

Secondly, it is a tradition that has a very rich history and is considered to have become deeply rooted in or intertwined with the Dutch identity according to the participants. The endurance of a tradition throughout the ages is a confirmation for the participants that this tradition belongs to the people. Another important recurring element is that the Sinterklaas tradition is considered to be less commercial or less commercially oriented than other increasingly popular holiday traditions such as Christmas (i.e. Santa Claus). Sinterklaas is perceived to be not only about receiving and handing out gifts, but also about caring for each other and the less fortunate. Thus it seems that underlying symbolism still has influence, however, the emotional value and nostalgia should also not be underestimated:

“Why do you have to change it that badly, I mean, whether it stays or not- for personal reasons I think it’s important that it stays because it’s a fun celebration. I cannot objectively argue against or defend why it should stay, but I can tell you this: why should you change it? On a personal level I can bring you an incredible amount of arguments, but on an objective level I can’t make a convincing case.”

- Participant 2

However, there are also some skeptical sounds as some participants did not really see it as something typically Dutch. They referred to the fact that the province of Flanders in Belgium and some areas of Germany have similar celebrations. According to them, Sinterklaas is something the Dutch have embraced, claimed and artificially constructed as something of ‘us’, instead of something that is intrinsically connected with the Dutch identity.

3.3.6 Maintenance of the tradition

Should changes occur, and according to some participants this is inevitable, it is best that this is done in a gradual and more natural manner instead of it being enforced on the people by a minority that is considered to be rebellious or overreacting. Changes in the past mostly consisted of character traits, as described above; punishment moved to the background and Zwarte Piet became more independent. The skin color was also changed, as participant 12 and 13 explained; Zwarte Pieten used to be pitch black a couple of decades ago. This made them look more frightening and stern since a lot of expression in the face was lost. Therefore, they made Zwarte Piet a shade of dark brown since it is

considered to be more realistic and to increase their expression and friendliness. Despite the fact that change has been part of this tradition, albeit spanning decades, several participants expressed their concerns that abolishing Zwarte Piet or changing the character too drastically will lead to social unrest or stimulate racism and societal polarization even further:

“[I]t’s a game that is being played and I’m playing along. So if you ask me: is it a fairy tale?, I’d say yes. And you can believe in the fairy tale or believe in another fairy tale, it’s your own decision. But let people believe in the fairy tale as long as they want to. Because this country is liberal and one can do a lot here and we will not be forced to do anything (...). Nothing will be enforced because that does not fit in our society.”

- Jan van Wijk

3.3.7 Sinterklaas was never meant to be racist

Aside from the given arguments as to why Zwarte Piet is black or what kind of role he fulfils, the main mindset that can be discerned among the supporters in the light of the accusations of the opponents is that the tradition and celebration is never meant to be racist. As stated earlier, participants claim to have never associated Zwarte Piet with real black people, some participants even told that they never even noticed that Zwarte Piet was different or something unusual. In other words, Zwarte Piet seems to have been accepted without question.

In their minds, it is an element that is intrinsically connected with Sinterklaas and all the positive connotations and underlying ideologies that surround it. Several participants even stated that they did not even know that there were problems with the appearance of Zwarte Piet until the debate of 2013 when they were first confronted with it. Interestingly, even when confronted with this newfound perspective, the positive feelings and nostalgia seems to be stronger or some of the supporters still do not understand “what the fuss is all about (participant 2)”. So, even though participants seem to know and understand where the opponents are coming from, they feel that there is a misinterpretation in the manner in which Zwarte Piet is represented in the minds of the opponents and the ideologies connected to it:

“Zwarte Piet is supposed to evoke something from these people, but it’s not even connected with slavery. No, it’s about happiness and joy.”

- Participant 14

When discussing the subject of racism itself, every participant is firmly against it and most are also aware that it still is an issue that relevant in contemporary society. On the other hand, one can see that there are several participants who have become irritated by the tense atmosphere of increasing political correctness and various cultural or ethnic groups claiming that they are being discriminated

against. According to some, this is also one of the reasons why supporters were also initiating counter-protests and other kinds of initiatives; they were fed up with being constantly confronted with accusations of racism and Zwarte Piet felt like a bridge too far, or as a participant argued:

“I think (...) that the anger originates from the ‘racism card’ that’s been played and people have grown so tired of it and because it is a celebration that affects a lot of people. I think that people from the lower social classes are more fanatical in celebrating Sinterklaas than people from higher classes and this makes them protest quicker.”

- Participant 7

When talking about the opponents of Zwarte Piet, one can see that most participants do not understand what makes them protest against Sinterklaas. As stated earlier, they are able to see the connections with slavery, however these connotations are no longer valid and thus the opponents are fighting against something that is almost unanimously considered to be an innocent children’s festivity. When asking about the possible motivations, several participants argued that these opponents are merely using the figure of Zwarte Piet as a vehicle to which they can promote their own political or personal agendas. Some of the participants have the suspicion that the opponents are struggling with deeply personal issues such as lack of self-esteem, feelings of jealousy or social injustice and because Zwarte Piet is a very visible icon for many Dutchmen, attacking him will generate more publicity for the group and subsequently, more recognition for their situation. According to participant 11, Zwarte Piet is the perfect “scape goat” to which the opponents can “project their problems onto.” Participant 8 even went as far as paradoxically claiming that the opponents are outraged because the supporters do not differentiate on the basis of one’s skin color.

3.3.8 Minimizing the issue

Instead of accusing Zwarte Piet of being a symbol of racism, most participants feel that the opponents should concentrate their efforts on ‘real’ forms of discrimination, for example hate crimes against homosexuals, or try to stop contemporary cases of slavery, for example the poor working conditions of migrant workers building the football stadiums in Qatar. They see Sinterklaas as something minor or insignificant compared to these societal issues. Jan van Wijk even stated that it will be a Pyrrhus victory (i.e. one puts so much effort in acquiring victory, that it is equal to defeat) when the opponents have finally achieved their change. Other participants agreed with him, stating that there will always be new cases of discrimination and people will find different ways to insult one another, but that a valued tradition and a great source of entertainment for the children will be gone forever. Some even expressed concerns that the same opponents will direct their attention to other traditions or cultural elements within the Netherlands:

“I think it has more to do with the feeling of: ‘Look, now they are taking this away from us too. If Zwarte Piet is abolished, where will they start next?’ And then this is racist, then that’s racist, until nothing remains of the Dutch culture.”

- Participant 1

There were also a few participants who felt that the tradition had been contaminated with negativity and some even feared that this would also affect the children since they can be easily confronted with this debate through social media. For a couple of participants the debate had soured the celebrations a little. Participant 8 expressed his concern that children have been made aware about racist ideologies and participant 7 argued that the debate about racism was being fought on the “wrong stage.” Others agreed with this mindset, claiming that “a children’s celebration should not be used for such a thing (participant 1).” Participant 9 also suggested that it would be best to discuss these matters at a different time in the year, not during the weeks before Sinterklaas’ arrival.

3.3.9 Suggestions for the opponents

During the discussion about the ethical side of the debate, participants were also able to share their advice and tips on how the opponents could best manage or position themselves in regard to the Sinterklaas tradition. By far the most popular advice was for the opponents to try to put up with the remarks and representations they believe is racist. In other words, according to the participants it would be best if they grew a “thicker hide” and also work on their self-esteem or pride and simply ignore Zwarte Piet, for he is only in the Netherlands for several weeks in a year. Several participants indicated that there were a lot of things they saw on the television that they did not like or were offended by, but that they learned to cope with it and let it slide, because they feel that is an important part of living in a multi-cultural society; one accepts differences even if they are not aligned with one’s beliefs or worldview. One is of course allowed to express their opinion, again this is one of the perks of living in a plural society, but participants are pleading to express it differently; with less intensity and uproar, but also more balanced. Or as participant 9 formulated it:

“If you only address slavery and you don’t look at the beautiful side of the story, well, then I would advise to look at both sides of the story because that’s often the problem: they don’t want to see it. They only want to express their own argumentations and are not open for those of others.”

- Participant 9

4. Discussion

In this final section of the paper, the previously presented results will be examined closer and analyzed through the means of the theoretical framework as well as the personal interpretation of the author.

One needs to be aware that this by no means represents the definitive or unbiased truth since this paper only directed its attention on a small fraction of this extensive and multilayered topic. This notion is something that will be explored through the use of the limitations that were consciously built into the structure of the study on the one hand and the following recommendations for possible future research on the other. Similarly to the other components of this paper, this chapter also has been divided into segments in order to provide the reader a transparent overview of the most important conclusions, complications and consequences of this study.

4.1 Racist or not racist, that is the question

One of the larger issues in this debate and something that can be considered to be the underlying cause for the tension between the supporters and opponents is the notion that the figure of Zwarte Piet, or more specifically, the manifestation of the figure is a racist stereotype and intrinsically connected with slavery and the colonial past. The opponents claim that the Sinterklaas tradition portrays a stigmatized relationship; that of a dominant ‘white’ leader and his ‘black’ servants. However, when one looks at the manner in which the supporters perceive the tradition, one can conclude that it is almost a mirror image: Zwarte Piet is not a servant in the negative sense of the word; on the contrary, he is not forced to do anything. He volunteers to work with Sinterklaas, loves Sinterklaas and the children they visit. More importantly, the supporters argue that it is not the purpose of the celebration to insult others or to dictate hierarchy among ‘races’.

It seems that both sides in this discussion have irreconcilable viewpoints concerning the nature of Zwarte Piet. This in combination with the emotional attachment towards the celebration due to nostalgia and pleasant memories makes it not surprising that polarization will occur. This discussion seems to lean on the question what racism actually is and if it is racism if it is not intended. As far as the supporters are concerned, Sinterklaas is an innocent tradition aimed at children without any trace of racism, slavery or other malicious hidden agendas. Therefore, every claim of discrimination is regarded to be out of proportion or farfetched. Even those among the participants that understand why the opponents think Zwarte Piet is racist, whether it be due to increased historical consciousness or listening to the arguments of the opponents, are still determined to continue their support, arguing that the connotations of slavery are no longer valid within contemporary society. The temporal aspect of the racist claims (i.e. colonial slavery) seems to be a firm anchor upon which most participants have based their defense on, since it is from this point that the supporters argue that society has become more multicultural and tolerant. This argumentation aligns with motivations presented by Dienne Hondius (2013) as to why the Dutch in general are silent about racism; it has happened in the past and

it is deemed irrelevant, including experiences of racism.

However, one needs to be aware of the fact that all the participants in this study were ‘white’ Dutchmen and thus the claims that racism has no hold on the tradition whatsoever can be considered to be biased. As one can recall, the existence of racism in the Netherlands, or at least the severity in which discrimination is present in the Netherlands is not entirely without controversy as Essed (2004) has shown when publishing her books about the subject. It can be argued that, since the participants do not belong to the groups who are confronted with racism and discrimination on a regular basis, it is possible the participants are incapable of looking at the tradition from a different perspective, resulting in a skewed representation of the celebration in their minds. Even when talking about the motivations of the opponents in the hypothetical scenarios, it became clear that they continued to look at Zwarte Piet from their own perspective, which is mostly fueled by positive sentiments and pleasant memories.

Paradoxically, it is this positivity that also spurs on the outrage among supporters when faced with opponents. This can eventually lead to hateful or downright discriminatory remarks as any visit to a forum or the comment section of online news articles dedicated to this subject will make abundantly clear. Various incidents in which people were harassed and protest marches also makes it clear that it is not merely restricted to cyberspace. However, when confronted with the above mentioned acts, it is interesting to see that the participants distance themselves from the instigators by claiming them to be “white trash”, “irrational”, or even plain “stupid”. This is in accordance with the study conducted by Sommers and Norton (2006) in which the stigma of being (called a) racist triggers the allocation of various behavioral and personality traits that are far removed from one’s own. The participants in this study make a clear distinction between themselves and those who, in their eyes, are also guilty in intensifying the debate and are increasing the polarization.

The same process can be found when participants were describing the opponents to have “low self-esteem” or were purposefully ignoring the perspective of the supporters, described by one participant the “beautiful side of the story” (i.e. the joy of the children). These discursive acts are employed in order to convince that oneself is a moral and more importantly, rational individual that argues from a deracialized and liberal context, whilst the others are attributed opposite characteristics; for instance that the opponents are too emotional and aggressive in their discourse (Augustinos & Every, 2007, 2010). This in turn is connected with the societal tendency to diffuse any claims of racism (Riggs & Due, 2010), since the participants have unanimously described themselves to be against any form of racism and discrimination and thus being tolerant people. The accusations expressed by the opponents are often construed as misinterpretations by the participants. One can read more about this subject in paragraph 4.4.

4.2 Not a slave, but a friend

When explaining why exactly Zwarte Piet is not racist, one can discern several strategies in which the participants construct their defense and deny racism. First of all, the motivations of the opponents are

questioned. Most of the participants claim that Zwarte Piet is used as a platform in which the opponents can achieve their own personal and political goals. In other words, they are doing this to get attention. Whether these claims are founded or not is irrelevant in this matter, more important is the fact that the claims of the opponents are trivialized or that the accusations are considered to be exaggerated. These strategies are described by Petrova (2000), Babacan (2008) and Chiang (2010) as being used to save one's face. As stated earlier, racism is heavily stigmatized. Thus, it would not be unreasonable to assume that supporters of the Sinterklaas tradition use these constructs not only to save their own face, but that of the group as well. The 'blame' of the intensity of the debate is effectively placed on the opponents since they are being unreasonable.

Another strategy that has been used by participants, albeit not discussed as extensively as the strategy above, is the fact that people of various cultures and skin color celebrate the tradition with as much joy as the 'white' Dutchmen. As described in the previous chapter, there are black people who like to play the roles of both Zwarte Piet and Sinterklaas. This use of tokenism (i.e. the use of successful minority members to mitigate claims of racism (Petrova, 2000)) can once more be connected with the overarching strategy of questioning or dismantling the credibility of the opponents. By pointing out members of 'their group' who are actively involved with the tradition, those who are on 'their side' so to speak, the supporters have opened up yet another opportunity in which they can reject the claims of racism as being something that is not shared by the minority group(s) and is thus can be best considered to be personal grievances or complaints. Furthermore, the manner in which tokens are referred to by the participants can also be connected with the claim that the colonial history no longer has any influence on current society and minorities therein. Downplaying the injury of the opponents (Petrova, 2000) concerning the representation of slavery along with their feelings and attitudes towards the subject, reduces the protest as something on a small scale and thus diminishes the urgency to listen or act on the allegations.

Finally, the fact that the majority of the Dutchmen are supportive of the Sinterklaas celebration is also one of the most used arguments. Transference from oneself to reflect on others in order to support one's argument (Babacan, 2008) has been used quite often by the participants, mostly in relation with the massive scale in which the tradition is visibly celebrated and cherished, but also with the joy of the children during various festivities and all of those who are actively participating, such as the parents and siblings. By referring to others who also share one's opinion, participants effectively 'prove' that their perspectives, opinions and attitudes are not unusual. Rather, it is the opposite; the Sinterklaas tradition is so prevalent and deeply rooted in the Dutch identity, how can anyone dare to oppose it or claim that there is something wrong with it? However, arguing from a majority standpoint as well as emphasizing the small number of opponents is also indicative that the participants generally have a mechanical view about democracy, at least, when it concerns Sinterklaas. From these conversations one can almost conclude that minorities have no choice but to submit to the fact that the rest is in favor of the tradition. From this perspective, arguments against Zwarte Piet and more

importantly the feelings of those that are offended by the portrayal of this figure are ignored.

Of course, one can sketch another picture of this story. Several participants tried to argue as to why this debate has increased in intensity and offered an explanation for the polarization. Some of these concerned the growing tensions between groups of people as a result of the growing multiculturalism in the Netherlands. The most prevalent being the ‘racist-card’ that is drawn more often in relation to various aspects of Dutch society. The confrontation with increasing debates about racism and discrimination in relation to practices most have come to accept as commonsensical or expressions of Dutch culture, like Sinterklaas, have resulted in discontent. This has led to the popular notion: “we have adapted enough for them in a respectful manner, so they should also adopt and be respectful towards our culture and customs”.

This mentality seems to be linked with the current political climate in which populist heritage receives increased attention. One can thus also explain the intensity in which some supporters defend the tradition as follows: “Groups that have suffered discrimination and indignity naturally seek to valorize their own experience in normative terms and to give familiar labels to what they feel are genuinely positive and distinctive aspects of that experience (Noyes, 2011).” Whilst not entirely translatable to this group since they belong to the majority within the Netherlands, it has been mentioned a couple of times during the interviews that supporters feel discriminated against or at least feel intimidated as more of what is known and loved around them disappears (i.e. “what’s next?”). In some cases, this can result in increased appreciation for the tradition and more resistance to reaffirm the position of Sinterklaas as cherished heritage. The fact that Sinterklaas is often referred as something that makes the Netherlands unique and also has also been used in the past by political movements to express national identity, confirms Hofer (1984) who states that traditions are important in the process of building the collective identity of a nation.

However, this is not to say that every participant consciously tries to discredit the opponents. When looking at the denial strategies as described by Petrova (2000), one can see that there are several participants who “deny in good faith”, meaning that they are honestly convinced that that Zwarte Piet is not racist and has never intended to be racist. Those who can imagine why opponents are against Zwarte Piet and agree with it to a certain extent, can be considered to be ‘partly knowing’; they are aware of the controversy, know the origin of these claims and the feelings of the opponents, but nevertheless are able to relay their doubts through referral to others. The typology by Van Dijk (as described by Nelson (2013)), also provide more classification possibilities for the denial strategies of the participants. The fact that all participants unanimously claim that the tradition is not meant to offend or that they do not mean of insult someone, is a clear indicator that their defense of Zwarte Piet can be considered to be “intention denial”. Furthermore, the fact that the tradition is also considered to be revolving around the joy and happiness for all children, motivate participants to deny the charges of racism using “goal denial”.

4.3 As it was, as it ever shall be

Even though there are differences in the manner in which the participants construct their argumentations as to why they are supporter of Zwarte Piet, there is one thing that stands above all: Sinterklaas is a tradition and traditions should be cherished. That the traditional element is one of the dominant aspects within this debate is not a surprise considering the attention Sinterklaas receives every year. This aspect on its own strengthens the support for a tradition as well as the frequency in which a tradition is celebrated (Shills, 1971). Every participant recalls positive memories about Zwarte Piet or the tradition in general and it is also one of the reasons why most do not see any harm in this figure; he only performs selfless acts and he does this with a smile. As described earlier, these fond memories are often connected with family, with the intimate atmosphere surrounding it and the cold, dark, winter days. Therefore, Sinterklaas has become ingrained into the ‘organic identity’ of the participants, meaning that memories surrounding the tradition are charged with positive connotations and is subsequently interwoven with one’s personal identity (Eriksen, 1994).

This in combination with the stigma surrounding racism and the characteristics attributed to racists, offer an explanation as to why most supporters react offended or agitated when confronted with the arguments of the opponents. Any change in the symbolism of the tradition is greeted with opposition, suspicion or hesitant acceptance. Change should not come to abruptly, neither should it be forced by a particular group that opposes an important element in the supporters’ lives. It is in this debate that one can see that traditions are capable of uniting as well as separating groups of people within a society (see Noyes (2011) and others). The ones that oppose the Sinterklaas tradition are often construed as “them”. The fact that this tradition is also firmly set apart both in ideology and practice from other traditions such as Carnival and ‘imported traditions’ such as Valentine’s Day or Christmas is also an indicator that this tradition is consciously constructed as something unique and of ‘us’. If any change should occur, it should be a gradual, natural process with everyone’s approval. This mindset seems to confirm Helsloot’s (2012b) notion of Zwarte Piet being ‘biografied folklore’, meaning that there is an optimistic and conflict-free interpretation of a figure that is unilateral and fixed. One of the most important features that is unnegotiable for supporters and the main point of protest for the opponents is the blackness of Zwarte Piet.

Participants themselves had difficulty explaining as to why the skin color is so important aside from the arguments explained in the previous chapter. One could conclude that there is no real motivation why Zwarte Piet should be or remain black, since it mostly seems to be an unconsciously constructed element of the tradition and is thus valued in its own merit (Jacobs, 2007). Even though there are numerous theories and legends that explain the appearance of Sinterklaas’ helper, these could be refuted on several accounts, as demonstrated by Helsloot (2012a) in one of his articles when comparing Zwarte Piet with the depictions of black slaves during colonial times. This however, does not change the fact that using a different skin color for Zwarte Piet or using no make-up at all, will have detrimental effect in the manner in which the tradition will be experienced by the supporters.

Following this line of thought, one arrives at Eriksen (2005): “Legends and legendary motifs thus supply a network of interrelated meanings and interpretations that may be activated around an object. At the same time it appears that as if these meanings emerge from the image itself, as part of its uniqueness (p. 307).”

Another curious aspect is that Zwarte Piet was never seen as a stereotype of the ‘negro’ by the participants or they have never questioned the color of the skin previously to the debate. Ignoring the mystery and excitement surrounding the figure, Zwarte Piet seems to have been accepted without a second thought. Aside from the factors such as age and the fact that this is the manner in which the tradition has been celebrated from generation to generation (Bronner, 2000), it could also be connected with color-blindness as described by Dei (1999) and Richardson & Nussbaum (2004). Race or the sociological concept of race are purposefully not discussed or simply ignored. This might have led to the general low level of understanding among supporters towards the arguments of opponents: they do not see race, but simultaneously also do not acknowledge differences and variety in culture and identity, including societal perspectives. Coincidentally, this theory was also offered as an explanation by one of the participants, but perceived from a positive angle; there are no races, thus there is no hierarchy or differences that separates people from each other; everyone is equal. One can also look at Helsloot’s (2012b) “cultural aphasia” theory for an alternative explanation. He claims that the supporters of Zwarte Piet collectively disconnected colonial values from the figure and replaced them with other, more positive values and in time will be considered the truth. Considering the almost blind adoration most of the participants seem to have with Zwarte Piet and the confusion or the lack of understanding about the arguments and motives of the opponents, this might indeed be of influence.

4.4 Answering the research questions

Now that the data from the interviews have been processed and analyzed, it is time to answer the research questions as described in the Methodology section. In order to get a satisfactory answer of the main research question, several sub-questions were formulated to structure the study as well as the ultimate answer. Every question will be answered individually and in a concise manner before a concluding summary will be given that answers the main research question.

1. What kinds of perspectives exist among supporters regarding Zwarte Piet?

Even though there are individual differences due to age and level of commitment to the tradition, overall one can discern a surprisingly unison perspective from the participants. Zwarte Piet is considered to be a very positive, slightly rebellious and comedic figure that adds entertainment and lightheartedness to the tradition as he performs his role within the celebration: the delivery of gifts and sweets as well as observing the children to see if they have been naughty or nice. The relationship between Sinterklaas and Zwarte Piet is considered to be mutually respectful and equally beneficial since they both need each other to spread joy.

The black appearance of Zwarte Piet has generally never been a subject of discussion.

2. *What kinds of perspectives exist among supporters regarding the celebration of the Sinterklaas tradition and its history?*

Again, there is surprising unison among the participants as they all have positive, warm memories regarding the Sinterklaas tradition. Most of the pleasant connotations are related with the intimate family setting as well as the game to uphold the illusion and mystery that is played by the parents and older siblings who no longer believe in Sinterklaas. Aside from that, the fact that this tradition is visibly carried by the majority of the Dutch society, makes it that the participants cherish this tradition as an expression of their culture. Even though there have been changes in the past, most participants are against more changes, especially when they are considered to be too abrupt or forced by a groups that do not appreciate the tradition.

3. *How do the supporters experience and perceive the Zwarte Piet debate?*

There is a general disapproval and lack of understanding among the participants concerning the scale and intensity of last year's debate. Neither party is free of blame, since emotionality and aggression fueled the discourse at both sides, effectively increasing polarity and societal tension during time of the debate. The role of (social) media can also not be underestimated since they are also accused of taking advantage of the situation and sketching a skewed picture of the debate by giving more attention to the opponents. Most of the participants are also convinced that the debate has undermined more important societal issues or diverted attention from real instances of slavery, discrimination and racism.

4. *How do the supporters experience and perceive the opponents of Zwarte Piet?*

There is a consensus that the negative connotations and attitude as propagated by the opponents are motivated by misunderstandings about the nature of the Sinterklaas tradition or stems from personal grievances, desire to seek attention or achieve personal and political ambitions. The validity of the slavery and racism claims are openly questioned and ridiculed as well as the viability of the movement itself since it comprises of a very small portion of Dutch society. The charges of racism are incongruent with the perspective most have of themselves and the tradition itself. As a consequence, the opponents are mostly ignored and regarded as a minor nuisance to an innocent and positive tradition mainly aimed at children.

In what kind of manner are the convictions of Zwarte Piet supporters framed and in what kind of degree can their defense be construed as an act of racism?

As the above mentioned and previous chapters have explicated, racism is unanimously considered to be deplorable and condemned among the participants. However, when dealing with the issue of Zwarte Piet, most supporters use a different referential framework or set of convictions from which they interpret and respond to the allegations made by the opponents. The defense of the supporters is generally construed as something legitimate since it is a tradition that represents childhood in the Netherlands and has become an integrate part of one's personal identity. The opponents of Zwarte Piet are equating a harmless and precious tradition with something that is considered to be a crime against humanity and this causes a variety of negative reactions that contribute to the tension between the two parties of the debate. The most important elements that determine the construction of the defense are the personal experiences and shared values that are transmitted and internalized when one participates in the Sinterklaas tradition.

Together, the supporters form a solid, tightly-knit group that unites likeminded individuals under the same banner and simultaneously alienate those who think differently. The sheer quantity of supporters only strengthens the notion that Zwarte Piet and the Sinterklaas tradition in general is something that is perfectly fine, effectively placing the blame at the opponents who, as stated before, are discredited and their efforts devaluated through the dismantlement of their intentions and viability. This group continues to share existing values among their members or communally create new values and attributes when continuing to celebrate the tradition and in the light of developments of said tradition (e.g. new arguments used in the debate). This is done through the use of personal social networks, but also with the aid of traditional and digital media. This effectively strengthens dominant mindsets, for instance origin stories about the skin color of Zwarte Piet, and perpetuates the notion that Sinterklaas is something that is characteristic of the Dutch culture and should be preserved. It is a self-maintaining cultural group that construes their defense and convictions as something that is natural, rational, something that is personally made and shared among friends and family, but also an element that is considered vital of the overarching Dutch culture.

However, one is still confronted with the fact that there is a group of people present within the Netherlands that are offended or hurt by the depictions present within this cherished tradition. Even though the opponents belong to a minority (an estimated 6%), it is nevertheless evident that the tradition is not entirely without controversy. The question that surfaces is; should one continue to support controversial traditions? Especially when one is living in a multi-cultural environment it is important to listen and discuss what is considered appropriate or not. The popular argument: "we are respectful of their traditions, so they should do the same", does not entirely hold up in this situation since by ignoring the complaints of the opponents, one effectively does not show respect for one's personal perspectives and ideologies associated with it. Furthermore, there are various prominent elements from foreign cultures that are simply not present within the Netherlands, for instance the

adhān (Islamic call for prayer) that normally is transmitted several times a day from the mosque.

Another salient aspect was that the participants almost automatically assumed that the opponents were comprised of foreigners or generally those with dark skin. This is ironic, since history has shown that the opposition of Zwarte Piet within the Netherlands started with a white, Dutch woman. This only explicates the “us vs. them” mentality that is emphasized during the Zwarte Piet debate and also re-affirms the notion that in the mind of the supporters, only (native) Dutchmen who grew up here can really appreciate the Sinterklaas tradition. Those of color are, in the light of the debate, often construed as the ‘other’ unless they have proven themselves as a supporter. However, do the above mentioned notions and convictions, whether they are construed consciously or subconsciously, make the supporters of Zwarte Piet racist?

As described in the previous paragraphs, the goal and intentions are claimed by the supporters to be the opposite of racist; they are considered to be unifying and propagate acceptance of everyone. From this standpoint, the supporters are not racist, or at least, it has not been the underlying goal of the tradition to discriminate or to segregate ethnicities and cultural groups within the Dutch society. However, this perspective is construed from the perspective of the supporters themselves and thus it is not surprising that they attribute nothing but positivity to their valued tradition. The opponents clearly experience it otherwise, telling stories about being called Zwarte Piet as a manner of insult or describe a general discomfort when confronted with the depiction of Zwarte Piet. These conflicting experiences and the intensity in which both parties defend their perspectives make it a difficult question to answer satisfactory within the limited frame of this study. Especially since it is not a straight forward scenario in which someone is openly rejected because he or she belongs to a different ethnicity or culture.

The supporters that participated in this study have not shown signs of overt affiliation with racist or exclusionary ideologies; neither do they seem to be overtly negative towards people from other cultures or race. However, the analysis of the defense of the supporters confirms that they use strategies common to racism denial and thus can be indicative of (underlying) racist motivations or behavior. On the other hand, when looking at the definition by Miles and Brown (2003) that was chosen for this paper (see p. 11), one can conclude that the somatic features of Zwarte Piet or that of the supporters are neither positively or negatively evaluated. The blackness of Zwarte Piet has never surfaced in the interviews as something negative or as an intrinsic feature that explains or legitimizes the servitude of Zwarte Piet towards Sinterklaas. Aside from the practical uses of disguising someone, the skin color of Zwarte Piet is mostly referred to and revered as a symbolic token comparable to the iconic miter and staff of Sinterklaas himself. Negative remarks about the opponents were also made towards members of that particular group in the particular context of the debate; they never or hardly generalized their opinions towards larger groups in society in everyday settings. One exception being the fact that supporters feel that society has grown overly complacent about racism and discrimination.

Sinterklaas represents an ideological arena or setting that is separated from everyday interaction and believes, creating a discursive context in which personal sentiments, gut feelings and

emotion are superior to reason and rationality. As stated earlier in the paper, some participants can understand the objections of the opponents, but they do not or cannot completely agree with them since they have such overwhelmingly positive connotations with Sinterklaas. This has created a paradoxical situation in which individuals display behavior that can be interpreted as racist or exclusory without ever consciously intending them to be. So even though the goals and intentions of the supporters are aimed to protect their tradition and simultaneously share values about kindness and togetherness and is thus not connected with racism in the strictest sense of the word, one cannot escape that fact that it remains controversial among several groups within the Netherlands as well as abroad.

The act of defending Zwarte Piet is not racist per se, however, it is important to realize that the controversy has grown more visible and intense over the years as the debate of 2013 has clearly shown. Due to societal and technological developments, those that oppose the tradition have gained a platform upon which they can increase their visibility and spread their message quicker and more efficiently. Since this debate continues to remain valid well after that Sinterklaas has left the country (i.e. due to several court cases and studies conducted about the subject), it is most likely that the intensity and scale of the protest will continue to increase or at least continue to spur on the debate in the years to come. This raises the moral question how long the majority can ignore, minimize and ridicule the protests with the threat of increasing polarization and overall fatigue concerning the stalemate in which the debate currently resides. The number of opponents has been estimated to be 6% of the Dutch population, how significant in number do the opponents need to be before their feelings and arguments are seriously considered by the supporters; 10%, 20%, 40% or perhaps 80%?

The supporters have disconnected history from Sinterklaas resulting in a Zwarte Piet that exists outside of time and has acquired his own place with the collective consciousness of the Netherlands. The opponents on the other hand, reaffirm the historical ties of Zwarte Piet with slavery and colonialism. Which of these perspectives is favorable is not the scope or intention of this study, but it does give one serious food for thought. Can one or should one disconnect the less comfortable elements from ones past in order to create a national identity and celebrate traditions? What does it say about its inhabitants when a nation chooses to ignore these facts and equally remain silent about the topic of racism? On the other hand, one can also wonder why a group remains so attached to a historical perspective that is pushed to the background or has little familiarity with the majority of the population. What are their chances of success when their efforts and motivations are only greeted with hostility and suspicion?

On the 3rd of July, 2014, the court declared that, even though Zwarte Piet might not be intended to be racist, it can nevertheless be considered offensive for certain groups in the Netherlands (the claim that the figure of Zwarte Piet itself was racist, was not acknowledged). According to the judge, the mayor of Amsterdam did not rightfully consider the feelings of these individuals when authorizing the parade and claimed it to be in violation with Article 8 of the European Treaty of Human Rights. This article declares that one's privacy, family life, residence and correspondence are

to be respected without interference of public authorities. The earlier described massive attention and the scale of celebrations regarding Sinterklaas throughout the Netherlands is thus deemed to be intrusive of one's privacy and personal convictions. No doubt this will have consequences for future Sinterklaas parades. However, the extent in which these festivities will actually be changed as it is celebrated throughout the country is something only the future will tell.

On the 4th of July, 2014, the VN committee of experts currently lead by Mireille Fanon-Mendes expressed amazement and concern regarding the fact that the attention regarding discrimination on the basis of race are virtually non-existent within the Netherlands. They also claim that the Dutch educational system provides inadequate attention to the subject of slavery and thus contributes to the lack of understanding towards the feelings of the opponents of Zwarte Piet. A particularly interesting quote of Verene Shepard in the light of this study is: "We reject the happiness of the figure of Zwarte Piet that hands out presents. It's stigmatizing, as if he doesn't mind to be oppressed. (BN/DE Stem, 2014)." The eventual impact of the VN study on the Sinterklaas celebration can only be speculated at this point in time, but the government already stated that they will only guide the public discussion, not interfere with it. As one can see, the steps towards reconciliation between the two parties are difficult and confrontational. However, it is of the essence for both parties to reach common ground and create clarity about where one stands on this tradition as a multicultural nation. If not for the opponents or supporters, one should consider the children; since their joy and happiness are often referred to as the most important aspect of the tradition.

4.5 Limitations and suggestions

In order to get a full picture of this study as well as the meaning of the results and conclusions therein, one also needs to have a clear understanding of the limitations and unanswered questions. As hinted at in the previous paragraph, this study has opened more doors for future studies than it has provided solid answers. This is mostly due to the fact that this study is quantitative in nature (more on this later), but also because it is a startlingly complex issue with overlapping and multilayered aspects that are connected with various elements that make up our increasingly multicultural society. Several of the following limitations have been already been discussed within the Methodology section, but are nevertheless important to address once more.

One of the first aspects is the fact that most of the participants have enjoyed higher education. As stated earlier, it is not known whether in what degree this has influenced the various perceptions that have emerged, but several participants have hinted at the fact that those from a lower social-economic status might be more prone to insult and 'taking arms' to defend the Sinterklaas tradition. It would be interesting for future research to perform a comparison study between supporters with low and high social economic status and see if there are indeed differences in perspectives and convictions. This might shed further light on the influence of upbringing, environment, education, social mobility in relation to the celebration and support for Zwarte Piet and Sinterklaas. Another interesting

perspective is the fact that political parties have previously elevated Sinterklaas as the icon of ‘Dutchness’. This can be interpreted as an indicator that the followers of these movements might be more fanatical or differing perspectives of this tradition. The attitudes and mindsets of individuals that are associated with nationalistic, populist political movements can be compared with the participants approached for this study, possibly yielding further insight in the manner in which the current political climate might contribute to the increasing polarization within society.

The fact that all of the participants are ‘white’ Dutchmen could also have had its influence on the ultimate results. As stated earlier in this chapter, the fact that one belongs to a majority group in society can have its influence in the manner in which one perceives the complaints and objection of the opponents. It would thus be very interesting for future research to concentrate on the ‘black’ supporters of Sinterklaas and how they experience the tradition. Are there significant differences in which they celebrate Sinterklaas, how do they look at the allegations of the opponents and in what degree can they sympathize with them? These results can be compared with the opponents or can be cross-referenced with the ‘white’ supporters from various social economic levels and provide further understanding as to what kind of factors attributed to their support of Zwarte Piet.

Due to the qualitative nature of this study and the instruments that were used to gather data from the participants, the interviews were restricted to a couple of subjects that represented only a fraction of possible aspects than can be studied. With the exception of two participants including Jan van Wijk who were very committed with the Sinterklaas tradition on a semi-professional level, most of the interviews were under an hour. This limited the opportunity to delve deeper into the underlying motivations and surrounding aspects of Zwarte Piet, which could have provided a limited view on all possible perspectives about this subject. A quantitative study can be possibly deployed in order to confirm the findings of this study and can sketch a representative picture in the manner in which supporters and opponents are divided across the Netherlands. Is this debate, as Jan van Wijk and several other participants hinted at, an urban problem concentrated in the Randstad area? If so, what kind of implications could this have on the future of the debate and the celebration of Sinterklaas?

Furthermore it would be interesting to conduct a study among supporters in Belgium and compare these results with that of this study. What is exactly the reason why there is little to no debate in Belgium or at least why does it appear to be so? Is there something intrinsic about the Flemish supporters that set them apart from the Dutch supporters of Sinterklaas? Finally, future studies could concentrate on the discourse itself and the manner in which the argumentations that were uncovered in this study are used when confronted with argumentations and perspectives of opponents. The interpretation process of supporters could provide further insight in how racism denial is constructed and executed. This could be done in focus groups wherein the interaction between the supporters and opponents can be carefully monitored and studied in detail. This study could yield more understanding of the discourse surrounding racism in general, but also possibly provide clues in the manner in which this debate can proceed to the next level.

Notes

- 1) The title of this paragraph is a translated line from one of the most popular of Sinterklaas songs called '*Hoor wie klopt daar kinderen*' ['Listen children, who is it that is knocking']. It is one of the more questionable lines encountered in Sinterklaas songs since it can be interpreted as carrying implicit expectations about the nature of people with dark skin.

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APPENDIX 1

Interview script

- Introductie (Bedank voor tijd, doel en opzet onderzoek, waarborging van privacy en gegevens, heeft participant nog vragen of opmerkingen?)
- Introductie participant

Zwarte Piet

- Wat voor soort herinneringen heeft u aan Zwarte Piet?
- Wat voor plaats heeft Zwarte Piet volgens u binnen de traditie van het Sinterklaasfeest?
- Wat is volgens u de reden waarom Zwarte Piet zo populair is?

Viering

- Viert u Sinterklaas? Zo ja, waarom en hoe?
- Hoe zou u het Sinterklaasfeest uitleggen aan mensen die er niet bekend mee zijn?
- In hoeverre staat u open voor verdere aanpassingen van het feest?
- Waarom moeten wij juist deze traditie behouden?
- In hoeverre denken uw familieleden, vrienden en kennis hetzelfde over Zwarte Piet?
- Waarom is Sinterklaas typisch Nederlands / zo diepgeworteld in Nederland?

Debat '13

- In hoeverre heeft u het debat gevolgd? Welke bronnen heeft u daarbij voornamelijk geraadpleegd (mond-tot-mond, media, etc.)? Wat vond u daarvan?
- Wat vindt u het belangrijkste wat uit het debat is gekomen? Hoe voelt u zich daarbij?
- Waarom denkt u dat dit onderwerp gevoelig ligt bij de mensen? Ervaart u dat zelf ook zo?
- [[[Media uitingen voorleggen inclusief vragen over hoe ze zich daarbij voelen, etc.]]]
- In hoeverre bent u persoonlijk in een dergelijke discussie betrokken geraakt? Met wie en hoe liep het af? Hoe voelde u zich tijdens en daarna?
- In hoeverre heeft het debat (dit jaar of anderen) uw kijkwijze Zwarte Piet en de viering veranderd? Hoe voelt u zich daarbij?
- Hoe ziet de toekomst van het debat volgens u eruit? Hoe voelt u zich daarbij?
- Wat zou volgens u de oplossing zijn voor het debat (mocht er überhaupt een zijn)?

Ethiek

- In hoeverre heeft u ervaring met mensen die aanstoot nemen tegen Zwarte Piet?
- In hoeverre bent u bekend met hun argumenten en denkbeelden? Hoe voelt u zich daarbij?
- Wat zou u willen delen met mensen die zich oprecht gekwetst of beledigd voelen?

Conclusie

- Bedank voor tijd
- Gelegenheid voor participant om feedback te geven over interview en/of verdere informatie die mogelijk die behandeld is.

APPENDIX 2

[Algemeen](#) [Economie](#) [Sport](#) [Entertainment](#) [Opmerkelijk](#)

Bron: Nieuws.nl



Rutte: kunt niet tornen aan Zwarte Piet

⌚ Gepubliceerd: 18 okt 2013 17:17 ⌚ Laatste update: 18 okt 2013 19:25 📌 Algemeen

Premier Mark Rutte (VVD) voelt er weinig voor om een einde te maken aan de traditie van Zwarte Piet. "Zwarte Piet is zwart, daar kunnen we weinig aan veranderen", zei hij vrijdag tijdens de persconferentie na afloop van de ministerrad. "Als hij wit zou zijn heette hij Witte Piet, maar de historische parabel gaat over Zwarte Piet."

VN-werkgroep: regering moet leiding nemen in debat Zwarte Piet



Een Zwarte Piet op skeelers tijdens de intocht van Sinterklaas in Amsterdam. Foto ANP / Evert Elzinga

Bron: NRC.nl

BINNENLAND De Nederlandse regering moet de leiding nemen in het faciliteren van het debat over de figuur Zwarte Piet. Dat heeft de VN-werkgroep die onderzoek doet naar Zwarte Piet [vanochtend gezegd](#). Op deze manier kan “begrip, wederzijds respect en een interculturele dialoog” worden bevorderd, aldus de werkgroep.

door Pim van den Dool

Opstootje tijdens Zwarte Piet-demonstratie op Malieveld

Bron: Omroepwest.nl



27-10-2013 | 10:39



DEN HAAG - Een demonstrant voor West-Papoea heeft tijdens de Zwarte Piet-demonstratie op het Malieveld in Den Haag voor verwarring gezorgd. De Zwarte Piet-demonstranten zagen de vrouw zaterdagmiddag aan voor een tegenstander van het sinterklaasfeest en sloten haar in. De vrouw kreeg verwensingen naar het hoofd geslingerd en kreeg te horen dat ze 'terug moet naar haar eigen land'.

Pietitie, de snelst groeiende Facebookpagina ooit in Nederland gelanceerd

Wo 23 oktober 2013 23:15, Jeroen de Hooge, 267542 views

Bron: Dutchcowboys.nl



Naar aanleiding van de berichtgeving rondom het VN-onderzoek naar Zwarte Piet en het mogelijk verbieden van het Sinterklaasfeest zijn twee jongens uit Roosendaal het initiatief pietitie.nl gestart.

Duidelijk is dat ze niet alleen te staan, gezien de honderdduizenden steunbetuigingen. De [bijbehorende Facebookpagina](#) heeft in minder dan 24 uur al meer dan 646.000 likes verzameld. Daarmee is het volgens onderzoek [van Fanrise](#) de snelstgroeiende Facebookpagina die ooit in Nederland is gelanceerd.

Sterker nog: op dit moment is de Pietitie de meest populaire pagina in Nederland en verslaat daarmee grote merken als de Bijenkorf, Heineken en KLM ruimschoots als er wordt gekeken naar het aantal Nederlandse likes. "Alle alarmbellen gingen gisteren af!" aldus Joost Lasschuit, mede-oprichter van Fanrise. "Zo'n explosieve groei van een Facebookpagina hebben we nog nooit in Nederland gezien."

APPENDIX 3

Vragenlijst Zwarte Piet onderzoek 2014

Beste deelnemer,

Allereerst hartelijk dank voor uw deelname aan mijn onderzoek over het Zwarte Pieten debat. U heeft aangegeven dat u het liefst schriftelijk wilt deelnemen aan het onderzoek en dit is geen probleem. Graag zou ik u willen verzoeken om uw antwoorden zo uitgebreid mogelijk op te schrijven. U kunt deze zelf onder de vragen typen.

Daarnaast zijn er in dit onderzoek geen goede of foute antwoorden, alleen uw oprechte mening telt. Zoals eerder besproken zullen deze gegevens in strikte anonimiteit verwerkt worden.

Ik wens u veel succes met het invullen. Voor vragen of opmerkingen kunt u contact met mij opnemen.

Wat voor soort herinneringen heeft u aan Zwarte Piet en het Sinterklaasfeest?

Hoe zou u de rol van Zwarte Piet binnen het feest willen omschrijven?

Waarom denkt u dat Zwarte Piet een populair figuur is?

Hoe zou u het Sinterklaasfeest uitleggen aan mensen die er niet bekend mee zijn?

In hoeverre staat u open voor aanpassingen van het feest?

In hoeverre bent u het met andere voorstanders eens dat het Sinterklaasfeest onlosmakelijk verbonden is met de Nederlandse identiteit?

Hier volgen een paar vragen over het Zwarte Piet debat van vorig jaar:

- a) In hoeverre heeft u het debat vorig jaar gevolgd?**
- b) Wat waren uw gevoelens en gedachten hierbij?**
- c) Wat is volgens u de belangrijkste conclusie dat men uit het debat kan trekken?**

Hoe ziet de toekomst van het Zwarte Pieten debat volgens u eruit?

In hoeverre heeft het debat uw perspectief op Zwarte Piet of het Sinterklaas feest in het algemeen veranderd?

Wat zou u willen delen met mensen die aanstoot nemen of zich beledigd voelen ten opzichte van Zwarte Piet?