Mental health advocacy on Twitter: Self-Other positioning in Depression Awareness Week tweets

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The study examines discursive practices of mental health advocacy by Twitter users during Depression Awareness Week by focusing on the content tagged with one of the most popular hashtags - #WhatYouDontSee. The hashtag was created by the UK charity ‘Blurt’ with the aim of countering the stigma around depression as the ‘invisible illness’ by encouraging individuals to describe their experiences of living with the condition. Drawing on positioning theory and sociolinguistic research on social media identities, I am interested in how campaign participants use both linguistic and visual resources to construct different relationships with audiences as they disclose depression and their everyday experiences, and how such uses may be shaped by the affordances of the platform. The analysis reveals multiple audience positions (as witnesses, jury and confidantes) arising from the combinations of #WhatYouDontSee with linguistic content and selfies. The findings point to the evolving pragmatic role of hashtags in social media as #WhatYouDontSee plays an important contextualizing role (Scott, in press) in addition to the function of improving searchability and signalling solidarity. I conclude by reflecting on the need to study networked ‘illness narratives’ as mediated performances that call for attention to the different semiotic resources used in the act of expression.