The World Cup has become the most streamed live sporting event in the US, as Americans tune in to this year’s tournament on their smartphones, tablets and computers in record numbers.

A surge of US interest in football has also led to record television audiences for ESPN, owned by Disney, and Univision, the largest US Spanish-language network. The USA team’s loss on Tuesday to Belgium, which took place during working hours, was the second-most watched men’s soccer match in the US ever, averaging 21.6m viewers across the two networks, according to Nielsen only behind the USA v Portugal game, which 24.7m watched on a Sunday.

But a 50 per cent surge in live streaming compared with the previous record, set during the 2012 London Olympics, shows the sport’s appeal has grown particularly among younger, more digital fans.

US viewers had so far watched nearly 30m hours of video streaming on ESPN’s World Cup website and apps, the network said, beating the previous record 20.4m hours during NBC’s 2012 Olympics coverage. Univision has streamed 1.5m hours during the tournament.

Akamai Technologies, a content delivery network, said online video traffic peaked at 5.7 terabits of data per second during the USA v Belgium game, a record for a single World Cup match this year.

With most matches airing during the work day, Americans were increasingly turning to their devices to keep up with the tournament. Fifa, the sport’s governing body, said US fans make up 20 per cent of its global digital audience and are spending more time on its site and apps than fans in Brazil, Germany, England
Univision said its Sunday broadcast of the Mexico-Netherlands match was the most-watched programme of any kind in US Spanish-language TV history, with an average 10.4m viewers. Its audiences have been largest in cities with large Spanish-speaking populations, such as Miami, Los Angeles, Houston and New York.

“Our audience focuses on three things: soccer, soccer, soccer,” said Keith Turner, Univision’s president of sales and marketing. “The success that we’ve had with this World Cup has been just phenomenal, so much better than we expected and so much better than 2010.”

But the private equity-owned network has also captured non-Spanish speakers, in part by making its streams accessible to anyone. On Friday it will start requiring viewers to log in through their pay-TV providers, as ESPN does.

Univision is also capturing the attention of the young viewers that advertisers are keenest to reach. At an average age of 36, its audience skews younger than viewers of English-language broadcasters, a reflection of the 10-year gap in median age between the US’s Hispanic population and the country as a whole.

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World Cup sets US live streaming record

By Shannon Bond in New York

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Fans are also flocking to social media: Facebook has seen more than 1bn posts, likes and comments since the tournament started, making it the most talked about event in the social network’s history. The World Cup has been mentioned 20m times on Twitter, according to data collected by Brandwatch, a social analytics group, and FGV, a Brazilian think-tank.

A Pew Research Center poll found interest in the World Cup was highest among Americans aged 18 to 29 – a cohort that has a high rate of smartphone ownership. Nearly one in four of that age group said they were following the tournament closely, compared with 17 per cent of 30-to-49-year-olds and 16 per cent of 50-to-64-year-olds.

Last week’s USA v Germany match drew a record 1.7m concurrent streaming viewers to ESPN at its peak, with streaming on Univision peaking at 747,000. Tuesday’s USA v Belgium match hit 1.5m streams on ESPN and 680,000 on Univision. In comparison, live streaming of January’s Super Bowl peaked at 1.1m.

While the elimination of the USA team leaves a question mark over US fans’ interest in the rest of the tournament, Univision’s viewership for non-USA games has been robust.

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