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C–H functionalisation of aldehydes using light generated, non-stabilised diazo compounds in flow†

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The difficulty in accessing and safely utilising non-stabilised diazo species has in the past limited the application of this class of compounds. Here we explore further the use of oxadiazolines, non-stabilised diazo precursors which are bench stable, in direct, non-catalytic, aldehyde C–H functionalisation reactions under UV photolysis in flow and free from additives. Commercially available aldehydes are coupled to afford unsymmetrical aryl–alkyl and alkyl–alkyl ketones while mild conditions and lack of transition metal catalysts allow for exceptional functional group tolerance. Examples are given on small scale and in a larger scale continuous production.

Diazo compounds have a long-standing history as extremely versatile tools for the creation of carbon–carbon and carbon–heteroatom bonds.^{1–4} As a class of compounds, however, diazo derivatives are notorious for their toxic and hazardous nature, and associated difficulty in preparation and handling. These difficulties are compounded when the diazo moiety is not stabilised by either a proximal electron withdrawing group or π -system, meaning that the chemistry of non-stabilised diazo compounds is still a relatively underexplored area. The use of flow techniques as an enabling technology^{5–8} can mitigate these classical issues to a large extent *via* the *in situ* generation and consumption of diazo compounds, so avoiding accumulation, allowing safer access under reproducible process windows.^{9–19} Accordingly, our group has recently published a mild method for the generation of non-stabilised diazo compounds from oxadiazolines using UV light and their aryl–alkyl cross-coupling with boronic acids.²⁰

Oxadiazolines are prepared in a one-pot, two step procedure by the condensation of an alkyl ketone²¹ with acetic hydrazide followed by cyclisation promoted by oxidants such as lead



Scheme 1 Synthesis and UV photolysis of oxadiazolines.

tetraacetate²² or (diacetoxyiodo)benzene²³ or by electrochemical methods²⁴ (Scheme 1). Oxadiazolines are bench stable at room temperature but, when exposed to UV irradiation, decompose to form the relevant non-stabilised diazo compound and methyl acetate.^{25,26} These compounds are particularly attractive for use in flow chemistry due to the certain safety issues outlined above, as well as the additional associated benefits that accrue under continuous processing conditions.

The addition of a diazo compound to an aldehyde with subsequent 1,2-hydride shift affords the corresponding ketone product (Scheme 2).²⁷ We have previously reported the thermally activated insertion of diazo compounds into a formyl C–H bond to generate unsymmetrical ketones using tosylhydrazones as non-stabilised diazo precursors in 2014.²⁸

Although a ubiquitous functional group, the synthesis of unsymmetrical ketones can still prove a synthetic challenge, making this an active area of research. In the recent literature, a number of methods coupling activated carbonyl substrates, such



Scheme 2 Mechanistic pathways available for diazo addition to an aldehyde.

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Table 2 Metal and additive free addition of non-stabilised diazo compounds to aldehydes in flow



in a moderate yield but cyclic *N*-boc piperidone carboxaldehyde (**30**) only a low yield.

When employing 4-iodobenzaldehyde (**31**) as the aldehyde coupling partner only decomposition to benzaldehyde was observed and the use of cinnamaldehyde (**32**), benzothiazole (**33**), and amino (**34**) or nitro (**35**) functional groups resulted in no reaction. In each case above, little or no conversion of the oxadiazoline was observed due to the absorbance of UV irradiation by the aldehyde. With this knowledge in hand, we found that a simple test can be carried out prior to performing the reaction which allows the user to determine the feasibility and potentially adjust conditions accordingly to maximise the yield. If the λ_{max} of the desired aldehyde coupling partner is at or above 310 nm (the wavelength of UV irradiation employed) then the reaction is unlikely to proceed (see Fig. S2, ESI†). We also found that, to some extent, this limitation can be overcome by lowering the concentration of the reactants and increasing the residence time of the reaction. This is demonstrated in the case of compound (**27**) (starting material aldehyde having a λ_{max} at

311 nm) where, under our standard operating conditions the yield was 16% but was increased to 41% by simply halving the reaction concentration and doubling the residence time.

As a flow process, the methodology is eminently scalable by simply running the reaction for longer. Without accumulation of any diazo intermediate, a four hour run under steady state at standard conditions provided 580 mg of ketone **19**, corresponding to a theoretical productivity of 3.48 g d^{-1} , with similar yield to the smaller scale run (91 to 94%) with this particular reactor set-up.

In conclusion, this work expands the scope and application of oxadiazolines as highly effective precursors to non-stabilised diazo compounds. Mild reaction conditions, short reaction times, and ease of continuous operation means this methodology offers a complementary alternative to existing literature procedures. In particular, the lack of transition metals or commonly used additives such as oxidants or bases allows for the incorporation of sensitive functional groups into the ketone products, laying groundwork for their immediate further functionalisation.



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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

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