



# Catalyst-free, visible-light-induced $[2\pi + 2\sigma]$ cycloaddition towards azabicyclohexanes

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## ABSTRACT

2-Azabicyclo[2.1.1]hexanes (aza-BCHs) are constrained pyrrolidine analogues with improved physicochemical characteristics in drug design. Here, we report a direct visible light-mediated photocycloaddition of 4-aza-coumarins with mono- or disubstituted bicyclo[1.1.0]butanes for synthesizing aza-BCHs without an external catalyst. The introduction of the ester group on 4-azacoumarin is critical for direct imine excitation and versatile synthetic utility. Preliminary mechanistic studies indicated that the reaction took place primarily at the triplet hypersurface.

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Rigid  $Csp^3$ -rich bicyclic hydrocarbon skeletons have been identified as valuable bioisosteres of phenyl ring in medicinal chemistry and agrochemistry since they often improve physicochemical and pharmacokinetic properties of drug candidates [1–4]. All-carbon ring systems, such as bicyclo[1.1.1]pentanes (BCPs), bicyclo[2.1.1]hexanes (BCHs), and bicyclo[3.1.1]heptanes (BCHeps), have gained rapidly growing attention as hydrocarbon bioisosteres for substituted arenes. Synthetic strategies, including the strain-release approach, have been developed to construct these highly rigid skeletons that mimic benzene derivatives with *para*-, *meta*-, and *ortho*-substituted patterns [5–26]. The heterocyclic variants, aza-BCHs as conformationally rigid pyrrolidine analogs, have shown improved water solubility, reduced lipophilicity, and retained bioactivity (Schemes 1a and b) [27–31]. The intramolecular cyclization approach was initially utilized to assemble the rigid aza-BCH scaffolds [32,33]. Further lithiation-electrophilic substitution led to functionalized aza-BCHs. However, the development of a modular approach for accessing aza-BCHs with diverse chemical space is still in demand.

We envisioned that a  $[2\pi + 2\sigma]$  cycloaddition of imine derivatives with bicyclo[1.1.0]butanes (BCBs) would provide substituted aza-BCHs in a straightforward and modular fashion. Although an elegant Lewis acid-catalyzed cycloaddition of *N*-aryl imine and BCBs has been disclosed [34], a metal-free approach would avoid

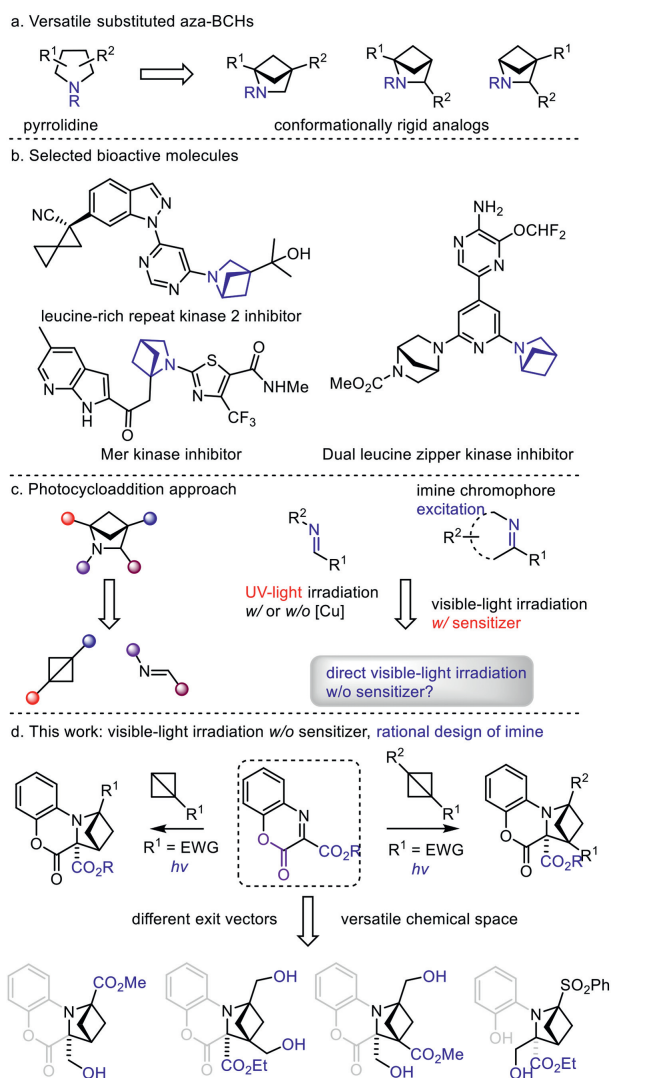
metal residue in the active pharmaceutical ingredient [35,36]. Driven by inherent ring strain releasing, the cycloaddition of BCBs with  $\pi$ -bond substrates (such as  $C=C$ ,  $N=N$ ,  $N=O$ ) has been explored in a thermal or photochemical way [37,38]. On the other hand, the photocycloaddition of imine chromophores is a long-standing challenge, attributed to radiationless decay or oxidation of the excited state of imine. Recently, several approaches have been developed to overcome these challenges in aza Paternò-Büchi reaction [39–42]. Nevertheless, the current methods mostly rely on UV irradiation or triplet sensitizer to access the excited state species (Scheme 1c) [19,43–53]. We wonder whether a rational design of imine substrate could enable a  $[2\pi + 2\sigma]$  photocycloaddition under visible-light irradiation in the absence of an external photocatalyst or photosensitizer.

Herein, we report our work on visible light-induced photocycloaddition of azacoumarins with mono- and disubstituted BCBs to provide aza-BCHs in a divergent regioselective manner (Scheme 1d). Furthermore, the subsequent downstream functionalization of cycloadducts enables a programmable preparation of aza-BCHs with versatile substitution patterns.

We initiated our studies with the rational design of imine substrate. In 2020, Schindler disclosed that the cyclic imine, 2-isoxazoline-3-carboxylate (**A**) [48], could be excited by visible light to its triplet state *via* an energy transfer process (Fig. 1a). Subsequently, cyclic imines, such as quinoxalinone (**B**) [49] and *N*-sulfonylimine (**C**) [50], were employed as chromophores in the photosensitized cycloaddition to deliver azetidines. We en-

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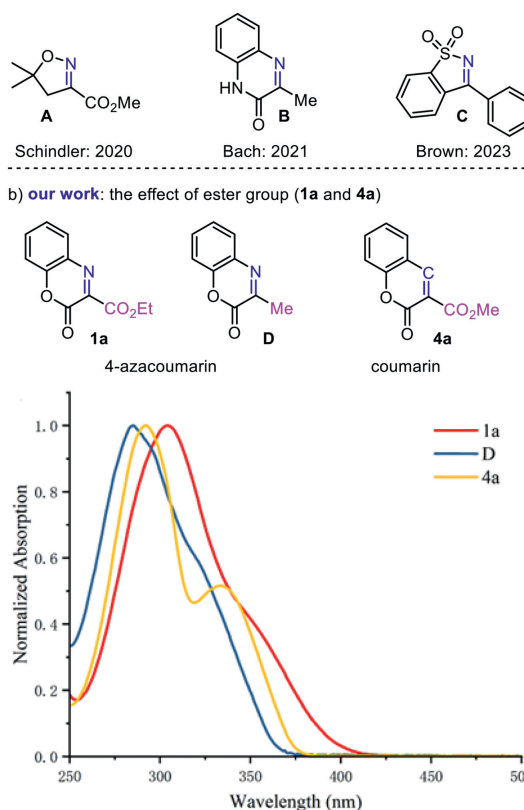
E-mail address: [plu@fudan.edu.cn](mailto:plu@fudan.edu.cn) (P. Lu).



**Scheme 1.** Saturated bioisosteres. (a) The substituted saturated bioisosteres aza-BCHs. (b) Selected bioactive molecules containing aza-BCH motifs. (c) The retrosynthetic analysis and synthetic challenges. (d) The photocycloaddition and divergent structural elaboration.

visioned that 4-azacoumarin (**1a**) would be a good candidate for direct visible light irradiation. First, the introduction of an ester group at position 3 could lower the excitation-state barrier due to lowering the energy of LUMO of imine. Second, the ester functional group could provide a useful synthetic handle, resulting in a programmable azetidone scaffold. Indeed, the UV-visible spectrum of **1a** in  $\text{CH}_2\text{Cl}_2$  reveals a strong absorption at 304 nm ( $\epsilon = 10,900 \text{ L mol}^{-1} \text{ cm}^{-1}$ , Fig. 1b). A shoulder absorption at  $\lambda \cong 360 \text{ nm}$  ( $\epsilon = 3700 \text{ L mol}^{-1} \text{ cm}^{-1}$ ) is observed, and the band tails into the visible-light wavelength region. In contrast, 3-methyl-4-azacoumarin (**D**) exhibits no absorption beyond 370 nm. In addition, the spectrum of coumarin **4a** reveals two absorptions at 292 nm ( $\epsilon = 11000 \text{ L mol}^{-1} \text{ cm}^{-1}$ ) and 333 nm ( $\epsilon = 6000 \text{ L mol}^{-1} \text{ cm}^{-1}$ ), respectively.

Guided by the observed photophysical properties, the cycloaddition of 4-azacoumarin **1a** with methyl bicyclo[1.1.0]butane-1-carboxylate **2a** under visible-light irradiation (450 nm) was examined (For the emission spectra, see Figs. S2 and S3 in Supporting information). After optimization (Table S1 in Supporting information), the expected 2,4-methanoproline derivative **3a** could be obtained in 94% yield as a single regioisomer when using  $\text{CH}_2\text{Cl}_2$  as



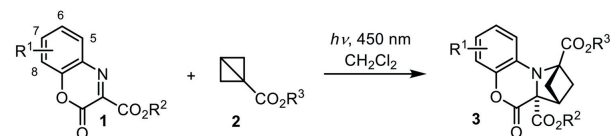
**Fig. 1.** (a) Studied imine chromophores. (b) Normalization absorption spectra of compounds **1a**, **D**, and **4a** ( $c = 0.05 \text{ mmol/L}$  in  $\text{CH}_2\text{Cl}_2$ ).

solvent (Scheme 2). In comparison, no photocycloadduct was observed when the reaction of **D** and **2a** was conducted at 450 nm (Table S1).

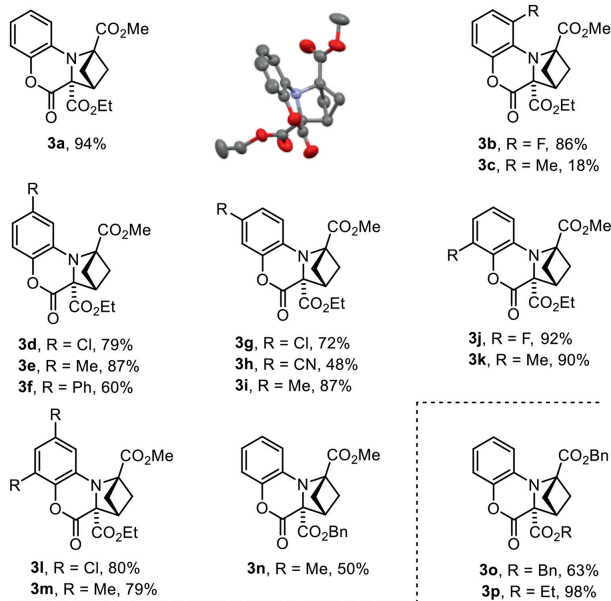
The substrate scope of 4-azacoumarin **1** was then surveyed. The 4-azacoumarin **1b** with fluoro group at position 5 provided cycloadduct **3b** in 86% yield, while the aza-BCH **3c** with methyl substituent was obtained in only 18% yield. In contrast, varying the position (6, 7, and 8) of the substituent on the phenyl ring of 4-azacoumarin **1** had little impact on yield. Both electron-rich and deficient substituents could be tolerated, giving the corresponding cycloadducts **3d-3k** in 48%–92% yields. In addition, disubstituted cyclic imines were applicable, giving products **3l** and **3m** in 79%–80% yields. Replacement of ethyl ester to benzyl ester afforded product **3n** in good yield as well.

The substrate scope of monosubstituted BCBs **2** was also investigated. The electron-withdrawing groups, including benzyloxycarbonyl, *N*-methoxy-*N*-methylcarbamoyl, 2-naphthoyl, and phenylsulfonyl groups, were all tolerated, giving the single regioisomers **3o-3s** in 48%–99% yields. Moreover, the cycloaddition of coumarins **4** was also studied. Switching the wavelength from 450 nm to 410 nm (Figs. S2 and S3), the photocycloaddition of coumarins **4** with BCB **2a** provided the corresponding BCHs **5a-5b** as single regioisomers in 85%–88% yields. The structures of **3a** and **5b** were determined by the single crystal X-ray diffraction analysis.

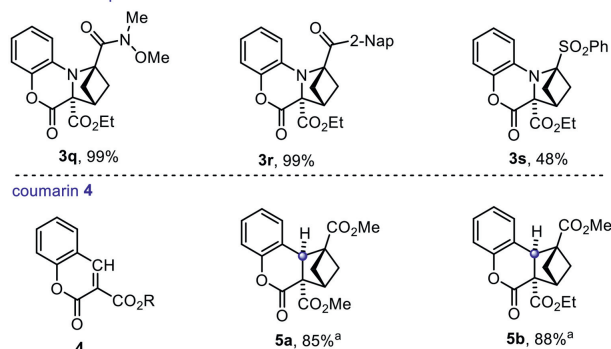
We next turned our attention to the photocycloaddition of 4-azacoumarin **1** with disubstituted BCBs **6**. After optimization (Table S2 in Supporting information), the reaction of **6a** and **1a** provided cycloadduct **7a** in 58% yield when irradiated at 450 nm in  $\text{CH}_2\text{Cl}_2$ . In contrast to cycloaddition with monosubstituted BCBs **2**, the regioselectivity was reversed. We assumed this is attributed to the stability of radical intermediate (*vide infra*). Of note, the formal ene product **7a'** (not shown, see Table S2) was also formed in 8% yield.



substrate scope of 4-azacoumarin 1



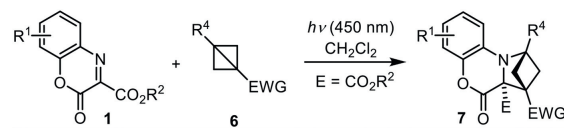
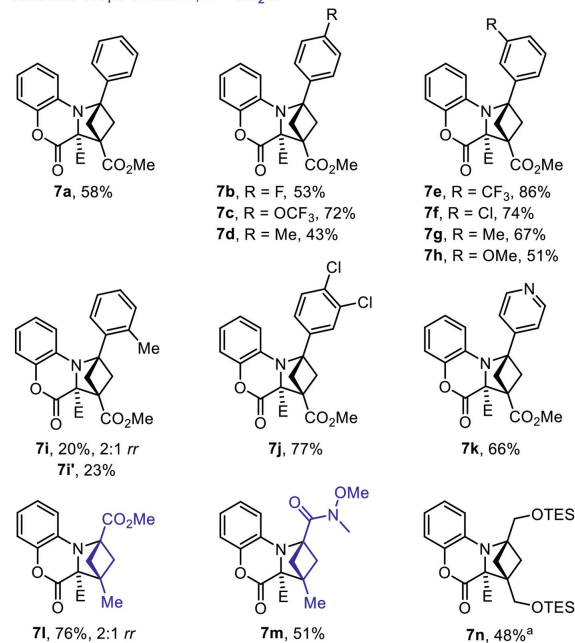
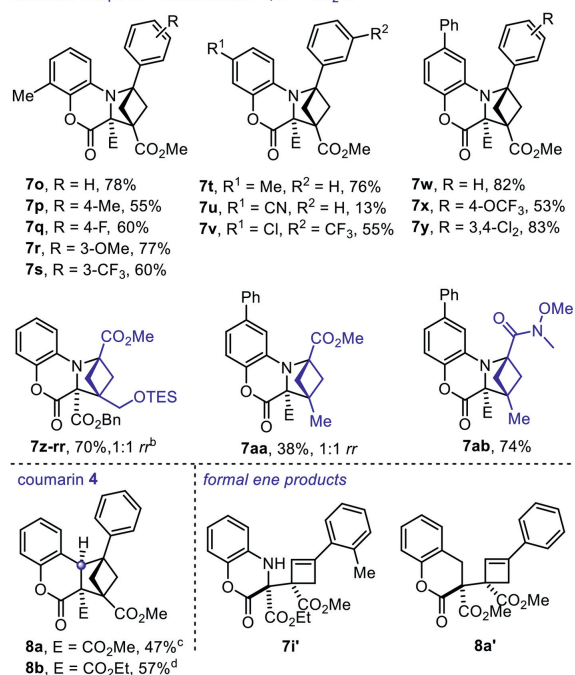
substrate scope of BCB 2



**Scheme 2.** The substrate scope of azacoumarin **1** and BCBs **2**. Conditions: **1** or **4** (0.1 mmol), **2** (2.0 equiv.), and CH<sub>2</sub>Cl<sub>2</sub>, *hν* (450 nm), r.t. <sup>a</sup> Irradiation at 410 nm.

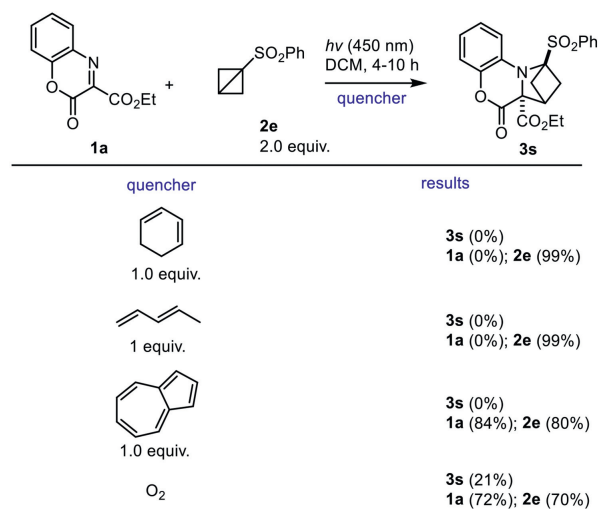
The substrate scope of BCBs **6** investigated was summarized in Scheme 3. A variety of *para*- and *meta*-substituted phenyl BCBs **6** was tolerated under optimal conditions, affording the corresponding products **7b–7h** in 43%–86% yields as single regioisomers. Both electron-rich and deficient substituents have a minor impact on the yield. However, the regioselectivity and yield dropped significantly when *ortho*-methyl phenyl BCB was used, and the product **7i** was obtained in 20% yield and 2:1 *rr*. The formal ene product **7i'** was obtained in 23% yield. Disubstituted phenyl and heteroaromatic BCBs were also applicable, giving the cycloadducts **7j–7k** in 66%–77% yield. Replacing the aryl group with the alkyl group had a notable impact on the regioselectivity. When 3-methyl substituted BCB **6l** was used, the product **7l** was obtained in 76% yield and 2:1 *rr*. In sharp contrast, the reaction of Weinreb amide **6m** gave a single isomer **7m** in 51% yield. 1,3-Dialkyl BCB **6n** was also tolerated, resulting in the cycloadduct **7n** in moderate yield.

We further examined 6-, 7- and 8-substituted 4-azacoumarins **1** with an array of 3-aryl substituted BCBs **6**. Gladly, only single re-

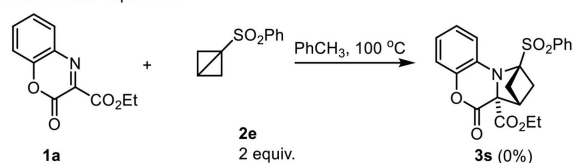
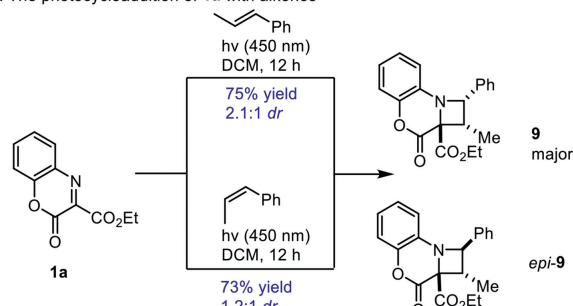
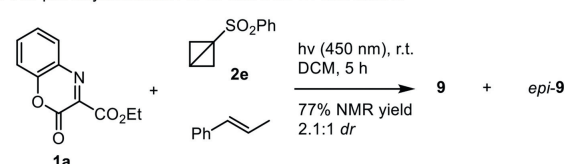
substrate scope of BCB 6, E = CO<sub>2</sub>Etsubstrate scope of 4-azacoumarin 1, E = CO<sub>2</sub>Et

**Scheme 3.** The substrate scope of **1** and BCBs **6**. Conditions: **1** (0.1 mmol), **6** (2.0 equiv.), CH<sub>2</sub>Cl<sub>2</sub>, *hν* (450 nm), r.t. <sup>a</sup> **1** (0.2 mmol), **6n** (3.0 equiv.), PhCH<sub>3</sub>. <sup>b</sup> **1m** (0.25 mmol), **6** (3.0 equiv.). <sup>c</sup> **4a** (0.1 mmol), CH<sub>2</sub>Cl<sub>2</sub>, *hν* (410 nm). <sup>d</sup> **4b** (0.1 mmol), MeCN, *hν* (410 nm).

gioisomers were observed in all studied cases. The yields of **7o–7y** were in the range of 53%–83%, except for **7u**, which was isolated in 13% yield. The ene product **7i'** (not shown, see Supporting information) was formed in 33% yield. Similar regioselectivity was observed when 3-alkyl substituted BCBs were applied, affording the



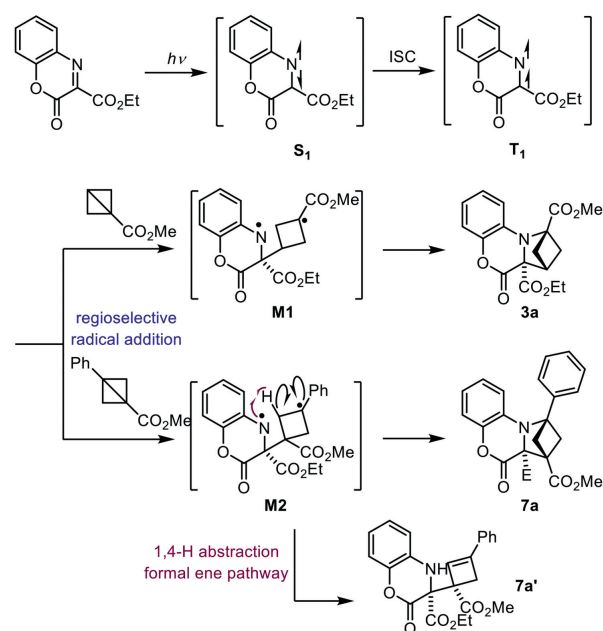
## b. The thermal experiment

c. The photocycloaddition of **1a** with alkenesd. The photocycloaddition of **1a** with BCB **2e** and alkene

Scheme 4. Preliminary mechanistic studies of photocycloaddition.

products **7z**, **7aa**, and **7ab** in good yields. In addition, the cycloaddition of coumarins **4** with BCB **6a** furnished cycloadducts **8a-8b** in 47%–57% yield. Of mention, the formal ene products **8'** were also observed. The structures of **7b**, **7i'**, **7aa**, **7ab**, **8a'**, and **8b** were elucidated by X-ray diffraction studies.

The quenching experiments were first conducted to elucidate the reaction mechanism of photocycloaddition (Scheme 4). In the presence of 1 equiv. of 1,3-cyclohexadiene [54] or (*E*)-1,3-pentadiene [55] no cycloadduct **3s** was observed. Instead, the cycloaddition of **1a** with diene might be much faster than the triplet energy transfer process or the reaction might take place in the singlet manifold. As expected, the reaction was completely inhibited with a singlet and triplet quencher azulene [56]. The reaction was significantly suppressed when triplet quencher O<sub>2</sub> was intro-



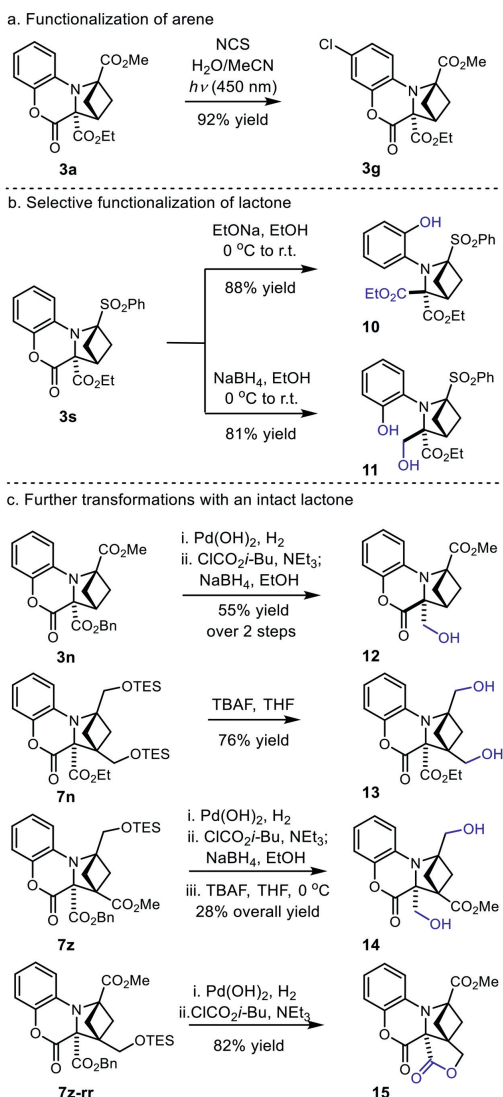
Scheme 5. Proposed reaction mechanism.

duced into the reaction. In addition, the thermal reaction of **1a** and **2e** gave no cycloadduct, indicating that light irradiation is critical for the success of the cycloaddition. Furthermore, the formation of a donor-acceptor complex between **1a** and **2e** could be excluded from the UV-visible absorption spectra studies (Fig. S9 in Supporting information) [57,58].

$\beta$ -Methylstyrene was employed to examine the  $[2\pi + 2\pi]$ -photocycloaddition of 4-azacoumarin. The photocyclization of **1a** with *trans*- $\beta$ -methylstyrene afforded cycloadducts **9** and *epi*-**9** in 75% yield and 2.1:1 *dr*. The structure of *epi*-**9** was elucidated by X-ray diffraction studies. Meanwhile, the corresponding reaction with *cis*- $\beta$ -methylstyrene afforded cycloadducts **9** and *epi*-**9** in 73% yield and 1.2:1 *dr*. In addition, the reaction of **1a** with both BCB **2e** and *trans*- $\beta$ -methylstyrene afforded cycloadducts **9** and *epi*-**9** in 2.1:1 *dr*. No cycloadduct **3s** was observed. These results suggest that the photocycloaddition of 4-azacoumarin **1** likely takes place at the triplet hypersurface.

Based on control experiments and the photophysical properties of **1a**, the reaction mechanism was postulated (Scheme 5). 4-Azacoumarin **1a** was excited to the singlet state at visible-light irradiation, which then led to the formation of the triplet state via the intersystem crossing (ISC). The regioselectivity of radical addition was tuned by the stability of intermediates (**M1** and **M2**) [22], and the corresponding cycloadducts **3** and **7** were obtained. The 1,4-hydrogen abstraction took place in the case of 1,3-disubstituted BCB, resulting in the side product cyclobutene **7a'**.

The further synthetic utility of cycloadducts was explored to demonstrate programmable preparation of aza-BCHs with versatile substitution patterns (Scheme 6). Radical chlorination by photolysis of *N*-chlorosuccinimide (NCS) at 450 nm irradiation occurred selectively on arene moiety in **3a** [59], giving product **3g** in 92% yield. Selective opening of lactone motif was then pursued. Basic hydrolysis of **3s** using EtONa led to aza-BCH **10** in 88% yield [60], while the reduction of lactone with NaBH<sub>4</sub> provided diol **11** in 81% yield [61]. Further elaboration of cycloadducts with retaining lactone structural unit was also investigated. Reduction of the benzyloxycarbonyl group in **3n** afforded alcohol **12** via sequential debenzoylation and reduction of mixed anhy-

Scheme 6. Further transformation of cycloadducts **3** and **7**.

dride [62]. Deprotection of silyl group in **7n** furnished diol **13** in good yield. Similarly, diol **14** with different substitution positions was obtained from **7z** through a three-step manipulation. Interestingly, lactone **15** was concurrently formed when the benzyloxy-carbonyl group in **7z-rr** was transformed into mixed anhydride. The structures of **14** and **15** were elucidated by X-ray diffraction studies.

3-Dimensionality (3D) of aza-BCHs was then evaluated by the principal moment of inertia (PMI) analysis [63,64]. A survey reveals that the 3D scores ( $I_1/I_3 + I_2/I_3$ ) of selected products range from 1.21 to 1.59, representing quite broad topological characteristics (Fig. 2). The cycloadducts **3a**, **7a**, and **7m** possess close 3D scores, in the range of 1.25–1.34. The diol derivatives **11** and **13** have much higher scores (1.50–1.59) than **14** (1.25), highlighting the importance of selective functionalization of cycloadducts.

In conclusion, we report here a visible-light-induced cycloaddition of 4-azacoumarins with BCBs, delivering a range of aza-BCHs derivatives. The reaction mechanism was proposed by combining control experiments and the photophysical properties of the imine chromophore. Selective functionalization of cycloadducts was also pursued, delivering aza-BCHs molecules with a diverse chemical space.

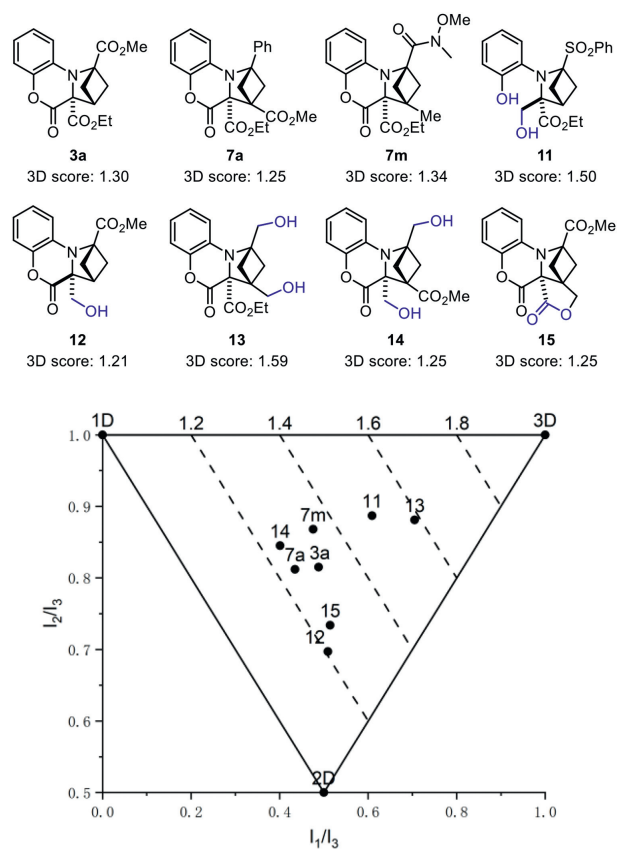


Fig. 2. PMI analysis of 3-dimensionality.

### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

### CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Min Yan:** Methodology, Investigation. **Zihao Ye:** Investigation. **Ping Lu:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization.

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### Supplementary materials

Supplementary material associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at doi:10.1016/j.ccl.2024.110540.

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