


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Succinct New Synthetic Route to Tetrathienoanthracene-Based Hole-Transporting Materials via Pd-Catalyzed Direct C–H/C–Br Coupling Reactions

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ABSTRACT

Tetrathienoanthracene (TTA) is a π -extended derivative of anthracene fused with four thiophene rings. TTA core-based small- and macromolecules have been extensively studied in the field of organic optoelectronic materials. However, by far, the existing synthetic routes to TTA-relevant molecules all relied on the traditional multistep synthesis involving tedious substrate prefunctionalization operations (10 steps). Herein, we reported a succinct new synthetic pathway (4 steps) to TTA core-based oligoarenes via palladium-catalyzed direct C–H/C–Br cross-couplings. Reaction conditions for the multifold direct C–H (hetero)arylations were optimized, thus allowing the smooth production of four new small molecules π -extended from the TTA core. These obtained oligoaryls were fabricated as hole-transport material in perovskite solar cells. Devices utilizing one of the TTA-based oligoaryls as hole-transport layer exhibited power conversion efficiencies up to 13.61%.

1 | Introduction

Anthracene is a readily available π -conjugated building block which has been extensively applied in the field of organic semi-conducting materials because of its superior planarity, charge mobility, and molecular stability [1–7]. While four thiophene units were introduced onto anthracene by material scientists, a versatile new building block named tetrathienoanthracene (TTA) was created (Figure 1).

TTA exhibited numerous interesting optoelectronic characteristics and has also been widely employed as primary backbones of various π -conjugated oligomers and polymers for organic solar cells (OSCs) and organic field-effect transistors (OFETs). For instance, Komiyama and Yasuda synthesized a series of acceptor–donor–acceptor (A–D–A) type oligoaryls consisting of a TTA core for OSCs [8]. Perepichka's team reported two TTA core-based small molecules bearing alkyl chains, which displayed outstanding charge mobilities of corresponding OFET

devices [9]. In 2011, Yu and coworkers disclosed the synthesis and OSC/OFET applications of a number of D–A type alternating copolymers using alkylated TTA as electron-donating monomer [10, 11]. More recently, Martin and Torres described, respectively, the preparation and fabrication of TTA-based oligomers as hole-transporting layer in perovskite solar cells (PSCs), showing promising power conversion efficiencies (PCEs) up to 18.76% [12, 13]. Except these two articles, no reports on the utilization of TTA-related molecules as hole-transporters for PSCs have appeared to date. Fabrication of a hole-transporting material (HTM) into perovskite-based solar cells has been a prerequisite to the enhancement of device performance and stability [14–17]. State-of-the-art hole-transporting materials for PSCs focused on the use of small-molecule HTMs since these π -conjugated oligo(hetero)aryls exhibited a number of advantages such as well-defined molecular weight, extensive synthetic diversity, and lower cost [18–24]. In addition to the most commonly used spiro-OMeTAD [25–29], PSCs incorporating several small-molecule

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10- to 4-steps. In Scheme 1, comparably, while adopting a traditional synthetic plan, thiophene **A** was treated with *n*-BuLi (deprotonation) followed by the addition of Bu₃SnCl (transmetalation) to give a thienyltin reagent **B**. In the presence of a palladium-based catalyst, **B** proceeded Stille reaction with 1,2,4,5-tetrabromobenzene **C** to afford tetrathienylbenzene **D** that was then brominated by NBS to produce a tetrabromo-species **E**. Intramolecular oxidative coupling of **E** (Scholl reaction) was carried out by FeCl₃, generating tetrabromo-**TTA** (**F**). On the contrary, the end-group **G** required a series of chemical transformations (from step 6 to step 9) to form an arylboronic acid **I** that could undergo Suzuki coupling reaction with **F** under [Pd]-catalysis to reach the targeted tetrathienoanthracene (**TTA**) core-based oligoaryls. Abovementioned was a general synthetic pathway frequently used in literatures to access **TTA** and its related molecules [12, 13].

2 | Results and Discussion

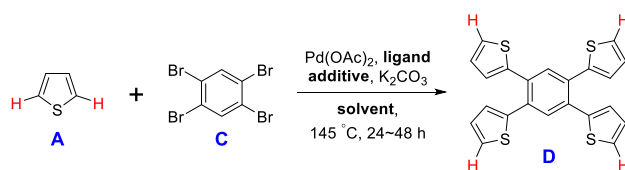
In this work, we proposed a 4-step synthesis shortcut, in which Stille and Suzuki reactions were skipped. Instead, the C–H arylation of thiophene **A** was conducted directly with **C** (first C–H/C–Br cross-coupling), thus facily leading to obtain a tetrathienylbenzene **D**. Similar to the reported synthesis discussed in Scheme 1, bromination and Scholl reaction were sequentially performed, which converted **D** through **E** to the key building block **F**. Finally, tetrabromo-**TTA** (**F**) directly underwent the second C–H/C–Br coupling reaction with the unprefunctionalized end-group **G** to afford identical targets (**TTA**-based oligomers). Therefore, we have omitted steps 1–3 and steps 6–10 for the preparation of essential thienyltin and arylboronic acids required in traditional synthetic pathways. To the best of our knowledge, this step-saving synthetic approach represents an unprecedented example to access the **TTA** derivative **F** and its π -extended oligomers.

To access the targeted molecules smoothly, part of the reaction parameters for the 1st C–H/C–Br cross-coupling were optimized by the treatment of thiophene **A** with 1,2,4,5-tetrabromobenzene **C** under a [Pd]-based catalysis. Relevant results were collected and summarized in Table 1. Initially, the reaction was conducted with a commonly used C–H arylation condition: Pd(OAc)₂/PPh₃/PivOH/K₂CO₃/DMAc, according to one of our [38] previously reported and other related pioneering publications [39–51]. However, we observed a significant amount of unreacted **C**, thus a fairly poor isolated yield of desired **D** was obtained (9%, entry 1). We tried to reduce the addition of solvent (0.5 mL) so that the coupling proceeded under a more concentrated condition. This did not make any obvious improvement (11%, entry 2). We then decided to employ reactant **A** (thiophene) as solvent to replace DMAc. Besides, reaction time was extended from 24 to 48 h. In these two experiments, slightly improved isolated yields of **D** were observed (22%, 26%; entries 3, 4). Comparably, it was found the reaction could take place even without the use of PivOH (27%, entry 5). Hence, based on the result of entry 5, a variety of ligands were screened in the following entries. P(*o*-, or *m*-tolyl)₃ gave poor conversions (15%, 17%; entries 6, 7). Tri(alkyl)phosphine ligands such as P(*t*-Bu)₃ was not effective at all (trace, entry 8), whereas P(Cy)₃ and P(adamantly)₂(*n*-Bu) demonstrated relatively better yields (34%, 22%; entries 9, 10).

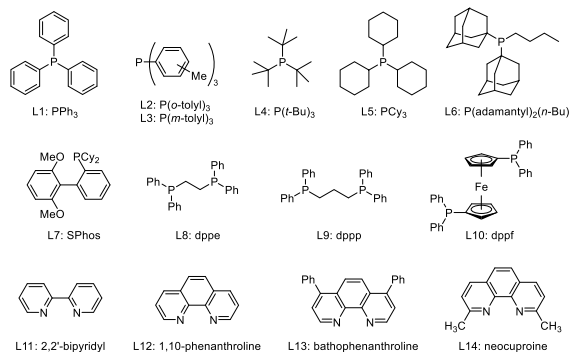
SPhos, a dialkylaryl-substituted phosphine, led to the formation of **D** in 21% (entry 11). Depending on the above results, we supposed that, up to this point, P(Cy)₃ would be the best ligand for the direct C–H monoarylation of thiophene. Meanwhile, we wondered if the present reaction could be switched back to 24 h. Therefore, in entry 12, C–H/C–Br cross-coupling was performed with Pd(OAc)₂/P(Cy)₃/K₂CO₃ in thiophene at 145°C for 24 h. We were pleased to learn that shortening the reaction time did not greatly alter the reaction outcome (33%, entry 12), compared to the result provided in entry 9 (34%). This inspired us to continue screening other types of ligands. The bidentate ones including dppe, dppp, and dppf were also examined, which generated the desired product in poor yields (11%–15%, entries 13–15). A number of *N,N'*-type ligands (L11 ~ L14) were then investigated. It was worth noting that 2,2'-bipyridyl displayed a relatively promising reaction conversion (35%, entry 16), while others exhibited an inefficient catalytic ability with Pd(OAc)₂, thus giving targeted **D** all in trace amount (entries 17–19). Finally, based on the consideration of the result acquired in entry 16, we performed the coupling reaction again with the regular conditions provided in footnote [a] of Table 1 (the quantity of 2,2'-bipyridyl was increased to 30 mol%). The result revealed a notable improvement on isolated yield of **D** (62%, entry 20).

Next, as shown in Scheme 2 describing our 4-step synthetic route to **TTA** core-based oligoaryls, the optimum reaction conditions for step 1 (entry 20 of Table 1) were successfully utilized to produce compound **D** in moderate yield (62%). Bromination of **D** with NBS afforded 1,2,4,5-tetrakis(5-bromothiophen-2-yl)benzene **E** in 68% yield. **E** underwent an intramolecular dehydrogenative homocoupling reaction (Scholl reaction) mediated by FeCl₃, which generated a cyclized adduct **F** in good isolated yield (80%). Subsequently, four different end-group molecules (**G1**–**4**) bearing 3,4-ethylenedioxythiophene (EDOT) or ethyne moiety as π -spacers were individually introduced to the core molecule **F** (**TTA**) either by 2nd C–H/C–Br cross-couplings or Sonogashira reactions. This led to form four oligoarenes for the potential applications as HTMs: **WKC04** (55%), **WKC05** (43%), **LHL01** (83%), and **LHL04** (90%). Reaction conditions and procedures for the above discussions were detailed in Supporting Information.

UV–vis absorption, electrochemical properties, thermal stability, and hole-mobilities of the obtained HTM molecules were investigated and relevant data were collected in Table 2. It was found that **TTA**-based oligoaryls consisting of electron-abundant π -spacers (EDOT) exhibited narrower optical bandgaps ($\Delta E_g^{\text{opt}} = 2.36$ – 2.38 eV for **WKC04** and **WKC05**), whereas **LHL01&04** with ethynes displayed wider ΔE_g^{opt} of 2.50 and 2.53 eV. Cyclic voltammetry experiments were conducted and the results indicated that **WKC04&05** incorporating EDOT moieties possessed the lowest-lying highest occupied molecular orbital (HOMO, $E_{\text{HOMO}} = -5.66$ eV, -5.69 eV). In addition, **LHL04** also showed a relatively lower-lying HOMO energy level of -5.56 eV. Their E_{HOMO} were even lower-lying than that of the perovskite layer (PVSK, $E_{\text{HOMO}} = -5.50$ eV), thus implying **WKC04&05** and **LHL04** may not efficiently extract holes from PVSK. Further, the thermal stability of each HTM was assessed by performing thermal gravimetric analysis. Except **WKC04**, other oligoaryls exhibited moderate thermal stabilities (decomposition temperature $> 300^\circ\text{C}$, $T_d = 310$ – 338°C). In addition, hole-mobility (μ_h) of the HTMs was evaluated by measuring their current density–voltage in the region of space-charge limited

TABLE 1 | Reaction condition optimizations of the 1st C–H/C–Br coupling.^{a,c,d}

Entry	Ligand	Additive	Solvent	Time (h)	Yield (%) ^f
1	L1	PivOH	DMAc	24	9
2 ^b	L1	PivOH	DMAc	24	11
3	L1	PivOH	Th	24	22
4	L1	PivOH	Th	48	26
5	L1	—	Th	48	27
6	L2	—	Th	48	15
7	L3	—	Th	48	17
8	L4	—	Th	48	trace
9	L5	—	Th	48	34
10	L6	—	Th	48	22
11	L7	—	Th	48	21
12	L5	—	Th	24	33
13	L8	—	Th	24	15
14	L9	—	Th	24	14
15	L10	—	Th	24	11
16	L11	—	Th	24	35
17	L12	—	Th	24	trace
18	L13	—	Th	24	trace
19	L14	—	Th	24	trace
20 ^e	L11	—	Th	24	62



^aUnless specified, the C–H/C–Br coupling reactions were conducted with 1,2,4,5-tetrabromobenzene **C** (1.00 mmol) and thiophene **A** (20 mmol) in the presence of Pd(OAc)₂ (15 mol%, 0.15 mmol), ligand (30 mol%, 0.30 mmol), PivOH (60 mol%, 0.60 mmol), and K₂CO₃ (4.00 mmol) in DMAc (1.0 mL) at 145°C under N₂ for 24–48 h.

^bDMAc was reduced to 0.5 mL.

^cFrom entry 3 through 20, thiophene (Th) was used as reaction solvent (3.0 mL).

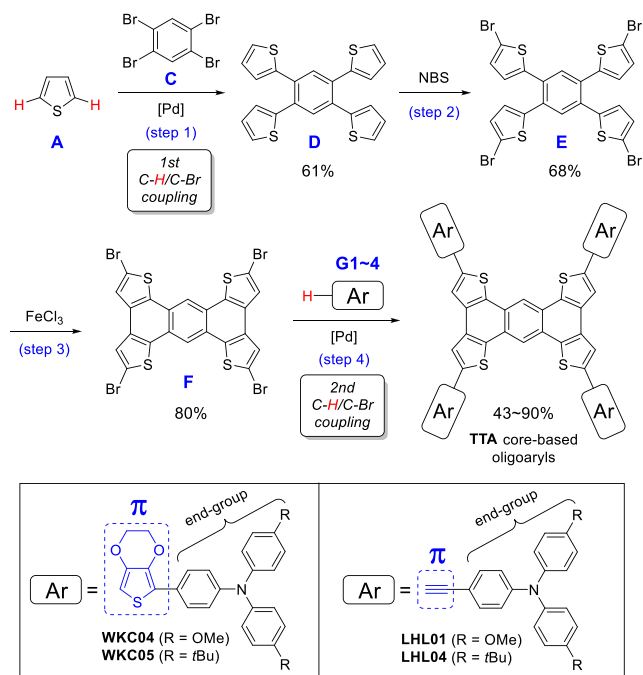
^dFrom entry 13 through 19, the quantity of each bidentate ligand was reduced (15 mol%, 0.15 mmol).

^eAddition of the bipyridyl was increased to a regular quantity (30 mol%, 0.30 mmol), as described in footnote [a].

^fIsolated yields.

current. The data revealed that **LHL01/04** possessed relatively lower hole-mobilities of $1.69 \times 10^{-4} \sim 2.49 \times 10^{-4} \text{ cm}^2 \text{V}^{-1} \text{s}^{-1}$ while compare to **spiro-OMeTAD** ($\mu_{\text{th}} = 2.97 \times 10^{-4} \text{ cm}^2 \text{V}^{-1} \text{s}^{-1}$). The μ_{th} of **WKC04&05** is negligible (≈ 0), which also suggested they

are unable to perform as effective HTMs. Synthesized oligoaryls were individually fabricated as hole-transport layer in corresponding PSCs. Their photovoltaic performance was evaluated and relevant parameters were summarized in Table 3. In general,



SCHEME 2 | Facile preparation of various TTA core-based oligoaryls by our 4-step synthetic approach.

to a solution of each HTM molecule in chlorobenzene was added lithium bis(trifluoromethane)sulfonimide (Li-TFSI) and 4-*t*-butylpyridine (*t*BP) as doping agents prior to spin-coatings (procedures for device fabrications were detailed in the

Supporting Information). Devices using **WKC04** as HTM were found unstable under solar irradiation; thus, the photovoltaic parameters could not be obtained. Similarly, PSCs with **WKC05** exhibited a poor PCE of 0.52%. We speculated that **WKC04&05** bearing EDOT groups were unable to act as effective HTMs due to their unsuitable E_{HOMO} for hole-extractions, as discussed in the last section (Table 2). Next, **LHL01**-based PSCs displayed the best PCE up to 13.61%, whereas **LHL04**-based devices showed an awful PCE of 0.48%, presumably also owing to its relatively lower-lying E_{HOMO} of -5.56 eV, which led to an inefficient hole-extraction from the PVSK layer.

The PCE of some PSCs is approaching zero (**WKC04**-, **WKC05**-, or **LHL04**-based PSC devices). We supposed the poor performance might not arise from the alignment between the conduction band of perovskite layer and these HTMs. Instead, it may result from the mismatch between the valence band of perovskite layer and the HOMO level of these HTMs. As shown in Figure 2, the perovskite layer exhibits a valence band of -5.50 eV. However, the HOMO level of **WKC04**, **WKC05**, and **LHL04** is significantly lower-lying than that of perovskite layer, which introduces an energetic barrier for hole-extraction. When the HOMO of HTM is relatively lower-lying than the valence band of PVK, holes cannot be efficiently extracted from the PVK to the HTM, thus leading to a considerable charge recombination and resulting in near-zero device efficiency.

In addition, the photovoltaic performance of the PSC devices with each HTM (doped and undoped) was demonstrated by the diagram of photocurrent density–voltage (J - V), as provided in Figure 3. It was found that, except the devices with **LHL01**,

TABLE 2 | The optical, electrochemical, thermal properties, and the hole mobility of **WKC04**, **WKC05**, **LHL01**, and **LHL04**.

HTMs	$\Delta E_{\text{g}}^{\text{opt}}$ (eV) ^a	E_{HOMO} (eV) ^b	E_{LUMO} (eV) ^c	T_{d} (°C) ^d	Hole mobility ($\text{cm}^2 \text{V}^{-1} \text{s}^{-1}$)
WKC04	2.38	-5.66	-3.28	283	—
WKC05	2.36	-5.69	-3.33	338	—
LHL01	2.50	-5.40	-2.90	337	2.49×10^{-4}
LHL04	2.53	-5.56	-3.03	310	1.69×10^{-4}

^aUV–vis absorption spectra were measured in dichloromethane solution. $\Delta E_{\text{g}}^{\text{opt}}$ was calculated from the absorption onset of UV–Vis spectra. $\Delta E_{\text{g}}^{\text{opt}} = 1240/\lambda_{\text{onset}}$.

^b $E_{\text{HOMO}} = -(E_{\text{ox, onset}}(\text{vs. Fc/Fc}^+) + 5.16)$ eV.

^c $E_{\text{LUMO}} = E_{\text{HOMO}} + \Delta E_{\text{g}}^{\text{opt}}$.

^d T_{d} was obtained at 5% weight loss of each TTA-based oligomers.

TABLE 3 | Photovoltaic capabilities of the perovskite solar cells using **WKC04**, **WKC05**, **LHL01**, or **LHL04** as HTMs.^{ab}

HTMs		V_{oc} (V)	J_{sc} (mAcm^{-2})	FF (%)	PCE (%)
WKC04		—	—	—	—
WKC05	Best	0.79	1.29	51.06	0.52
	average	0.64 ± 0.12	1.40 ± 0.21	51.71 ± 2.17	0.45 ± 0.04
LHL01	Best	1.04	17.63	74.13	13.61
	average	1.03 ± 0.01	15.33 ± 1.28	74.69 ± 3.14	11.79 ± 0.87
LHL04	Best	0.88	1.73	31.35	0.48
	average	0.71 ± 0.23	1.74 ± 0.46	30.64 ± 2.36	0.36 ± 0.12
spiro-OMeTAD	Best	1.06	23.05	75.84	18.59
	average	1.02 ± 0.03	23.38 ± 0.67	74.22 ± 1.57	17.78 ± 0.62

^aEach HTM layer of corresponding PSC devices was added two doping agents: 4-*t*-butylpyridine and Li-TFSI. The statistical data were calculated based on 6–8 cells.

^bReverse scans.

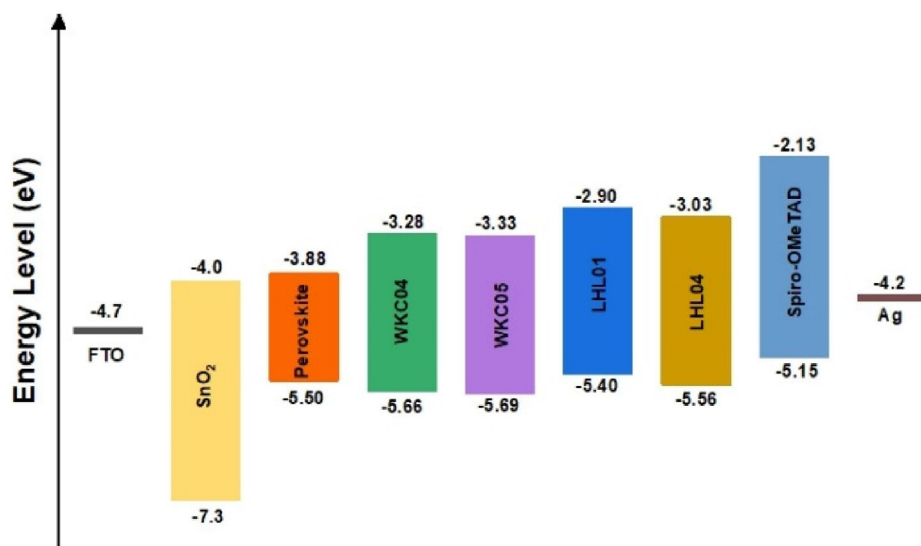


FIGURE 2 | The energy level diagram of each component of a perovskite solar cell.

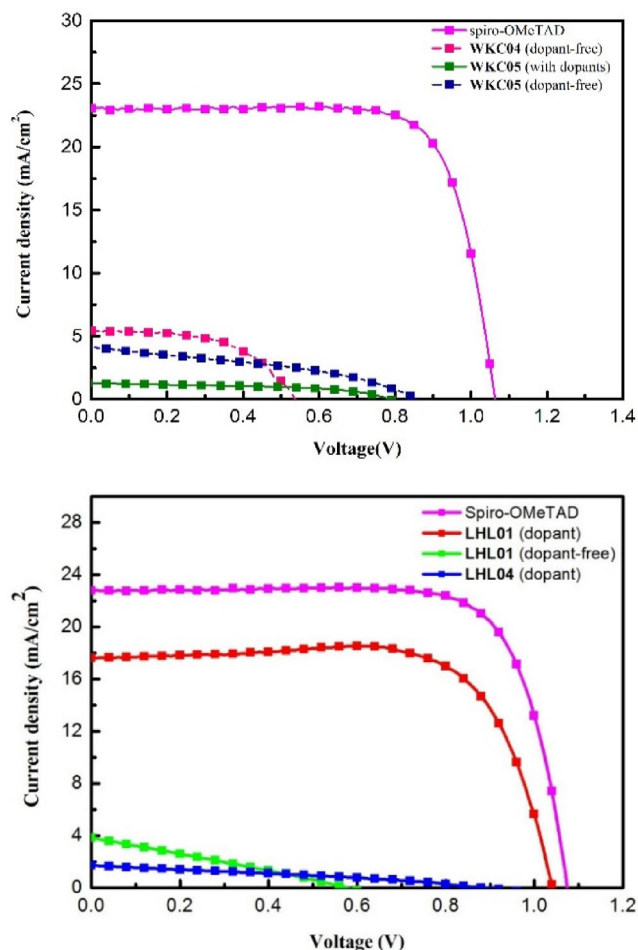


FIGURE 3 | Photocurrent density–voltage (J - V) curves of perovskite solar cells using **WKC04**, **WKC05**, **LHL01**, or **LHL04** as hole-transporting layer.

other PSCs gave poor or negligible J - V values under dopant-free conditions.

In order to further investigate the hole-extraction ability of each HTM, devices with the configuration of glass/perovskite/HTM

(**LHL01** and **LHL04**) were individually fabricated for the measurement of steady-state photoluminescence (PL) and time-resolved PL. Relevant spectra were provided in Supporting Information (Figures S5 and S6). In general, devices with the HTM bearing OMe substituents (**LHL01**) demonstrated relatively stronger PL quenching effect, indicating that **LHL01** are able to extract holes more efficiently at the interface between the perovskite layer and the corresponding hole-transport layer.

Furthermore, as summarized in Table 4, we compared the production costs of our four-step synthetic route to **LHL01** with those reported in the literature. The previously reported approach involved a ten-step synthesis, resulting in a higher overall cost of approximately USD 43.94 for generating 1.00 g of **TTA3** [13]. In contrast, our synthetic strategy required only four chemical transformations, leading to a lower estimated production cost of USD 39.97 per 1.00 g of **LHL01**. The reduced number of synthetic steps decreased materials consumption, purification demand, and operational complexity. This comparison highlights the practical and economic advantages of the present synthetic shortcut. The corresponding flow chart and detailed cost tables were provided in Supporting Information. The cost assessment was conducted based on the model reported by Osedach [52].

Finally, to enable a direct comparison between our synthetic route and the previously reported method, we evaluated the E-factors of both approaches. The E-factor analysis included all sources of chemical waste, encompassing excess reagents, aqueous and organic solvents, and silica gel used for purification.

TABLE 4 | Comparison regarding the cost-analysis for the reported **TTA3** and our synthesized **LHL01**.

HTMs	Synthetic step	Cost ^a (USD)
TTA3 (literature [13])	10 steps	43.94
LHL01 (this work)	4 steps	39.97

^aThe cost was estimated based on taking into consideration of all required reagents, chemicals, and solvents employed in each synthesis and purification step for the production of 1.00 mmol of **TTA3** and **LHL01**.

Our four-step synthesis of **LHL01** exhibited an overall E-factor of 1867.43, whereas the reported ten-step route to **TTA3** showed a substantially higher E-factor of 2915.2. The lower E-factor obtained from our method indicated a significant reduction in waste generation per unit mass of the final isolated product. Overall, this comparison demonstrated that our synthetic route is more efficient and environmentally favorable than the previously reported synthesis. E-factor calculations were detailed in the Supporting Information.

3 | Conclusion

We have successfully developed a step-saving new synthetic route to a series of **TTA** core-based oligoarenes through straightforward C–H/C–Br coupling reactions. This synthetic pathway represented a viable alternative to the reported syntheses requiring additional substrate prefunctionalization steps prior to Suzuki and Stille reactions. Besides, this work also demonstrated the screening of reaction conditions for the first C–H/C–Br cross-coupling in order to acquire the optimum reaction parameters. Hence, six π -extended oligomers including **WKC04**, **WKC05**, **LHL01**, and **LHL04** were facilely obtained in moderate to good isolated yields. These molecules were fabricated as hole-transporting materials in perovskite-based solar cells, one of which displaying 13.61% PCE (PSC devices with **LHL01**). Development of succinct synthetic routes for π -conjugated organic materials is currently underway in our laboratory.

4 | Experimental Section

General procedure for the synthesis of compound D: to a solution of Pd(OAc)₂ (34 mg, 0.15 mmol), 2,2'-bipyridyl (46 mg, 0.30 mmol), and K₂CO₃ (552 mg, 4.00 mmol) in thiophene (3 mL) in a sealed tube was added 1,2,4,5-tetrabromobenzene C (1.00 mmol) under N₂. The reaction mixture was then heated at 145°C under N₂ for 24 h. After the reaction mixture had cooled to room temperature, water (10 mL) was added. The mixture was extracted with dichloromethane (2 × 20 mL), and the combined organic layers were washed with brine (50 mL), dried (Na₂SO₄), and concentrated in vacuo. Purification by flash chromatography (dichloromethane : hexanes = 10 : 90) afforded the desired product D (252 mg, 62%, pale yellow solid)

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section. **Supporting Fig. S1a:** The UV-Vis absorption and

photoluminescence spectra of **WKC04** and **WKC05** in CH_2Cl_2 solution. **Supporting Fig. S1b**: The UV-Vis absorption and photoluminescence spectra of **LHL01** and **LHL04** in CH_2Cl_2 solution. **Supporting Fig. S2a**: Cyclic voltammetry spectra of **WKC04** and **WKC05** in CH_2Cl_2 solution. **Supporting Fig. S2b**: Cyclic voltammetry spectra of **LHL01** and **LHL04** in CH_2Cl_2 solution. **Supporting Fig. S3a**: Thermogravimetric analysis curves of **WKC04** and **WKC05**. **Supporting Fig. S3b**: Thermogravimetric analysis curves of **LHL01** and **LHL04**. **Supporting Fig. S4**: J-V curves for the determination of the hole mobility of HTMs in the space-charge limited current (SCLC) region (HTMs spin-coated from PhCl). **Supporting Fig. S5**: Steady-state PL spectra of the devices fabricated as glass/perovskite/HTMs (HTMs spin-coated from PhCl). **Supporting Fig. S6**: Time-resolved PL spectra of the devices fabricated as glass/perovskite/HTMs (HTMs spin-coated from PhCl). **Supporting Fig. S7**: Mass Spectrum of **WKC04** (MALDI). **Supporting Fig. S8**: Mass Spectrum of **WKC05** (MALDI). **Supporting Fig. S9**: Mass Spectrum of **LHL01** (MALDI). **Supporting Fig. S10**: Mass Spectrum of **LHL04** (MALDI). **Supporting Fig. S11**: ^1H NMR Spectrum of **WKC04** (500 MHz, THF-d_8). **Supporting Fig. S12**: ^{13}C NMR Spectrum of **WKC04** (125 MHz, THF-d_8). **Supporting Fig. S13**: ^1H NMR Spectrum of **WKC05** (500 MHz, THF-d_8). **Supporting Fig. S14**: ^{13}C NMR Spectrum of **WKC05** (125 MHz, THF-d_8). **Supporting Fig. S15**: ^1H NMR Spectrum of **LHL01** (500 MHz, CDCl_3). **Supporting Fig. S16**: ^{13}C NMR Spectrum of **LHL01** (75 MHz, CDCl_3). **Supporting Fig. S17**: ^1H NMR Spectrum of **LHL04** (500 MHz, CD_2Cl_2).